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WHEN HEROES LOVE

The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David

SUSAN ACKERMAN

When Heroes Love



GENDER, THEORY, AND RELIGION

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The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and
David



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Abbreviations

AB Anchor Bible

ABR. Kraus, ed., *Altbabylonische Briefe in Umschrift und Übersetzung*

ABD David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*

AHw Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* 1–3

ANET Thes B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. with supplement

AOAT Orient und Altes Testament

B *Biblical Archaeologist*

BAR *Biblical Archaeology Review*

BSOR *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*

BE Before the Common (or Christian) Era

BB Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*

B *Biblica*

BO *Bibliotheca orientalis*

CD Dace J. Gelb, et al., eds., *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*

CM Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places*

CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*

CE Common (or Christian) Era

CL *Classical and Modern Literature*

HR *History of Religions*

HSM *Harvard Semitic Monographs*

HSS *Harvard Semitic Studies*

HTR *Harvard Theological Review*

IDB John Crim, ed., *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume*

IEJ *Israel Exploration Journal*

I *Interpretation*

JAR *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*

JANESU *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University*

JOS *Journal of the American Oriental Society*

JB *Journal of Biblical Literature*

~~JCS~~ *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*
~~JNES~~ *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
~~JOT~~ *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
~~JOTS~~ *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*
~~JSS~~ *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*
~~LSJ~~ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*,
 revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones
~~LXX~~ Septuagint
~~NEA~~ *Near Eastern Archaeology*
~~NEB~~ New English Bible
~~NJB~~ Bible, New Jewish Publication Society Version
~~NRSV~~ Bible, New Revised Standard Version
~~OIP~~ *Orientalia Iovaniensia periodica*
~~OTL~~ Old Testament Library
~~RA~~ *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale*
~~REB~~ Revised English Bible
~~RSV~~ Bible, Revised Standard Version
~~SBLDS~~ Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
~~SBLWAW~~ Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World
~~SOT~~ *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
~~TDOT~~ Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological*
Dictionary of the Old Testament
~~TEB~~ Franz M. Th. de Liagre Böhl, ed., *Tabulae Cuneiformes a de Liagre*
Böhl collectae, Leidae Conservatae
~~UF~~ *Ugarit-Forschungen*
~~VT~~ *Vetus Testamentum*
~~ZA~~ *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*
~~ZAW~~ *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

Prologue

At least a thousand years separate the stories of the ancient Mesopotamian King Gilgamesh and the ancient Israelite King David, or at least a thousand years separate the earliest forms of the stories of Gilgamesh and David that have come down to us.¹ At least a thousand miles, moreover, separate Gilgamesh's ancient city-state fiefdom of Uruk and David's ancient capital city of Jerusalem, or at least a thousand miles separated these two cities for any traveler in antiquity, who could hardly journey as the crow flies, across the Arabian desert, but instead had to follow the more roundabout route that tracked the waterways of the Orontes and Euphrates Rivers. Everything we know about the historical Gilgamesh in addition suggests that Gilgamesh was of Sumerian stock and not of the Semitic ethnos of which David was a part.

Nevertheless, scholars have frequently been drawn to compare these two great kings' tales,² for despite the fact that the earliest forms of the Gilgamesh and David stories that have come down to us are separated by at least a thousand years, the final and most elaborate versions of these narratives—and the ones with which students of ancient Mesopotamian and Israelite literature are most familiar today—are basically contemporaneous, dating from the seventh and sixth centuries BCE.³ It is also the case that, despite the distances that separated them, the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia and the peoples of ancient Israel were closely associated with one another during the period in which the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical story of David came into their final forms; indeed, the ancient Mesopotamian empires of Assyria and Babylonia conquered and established themselves as overlords of the ancient Israelite Northern and Southern Kingdoms (Israel and Judah) in the eighth through the sixth centuries BCE. Furthermore, whatever we might claim regarding the historical Gilgamesh's Sumerian origins, the ancient Mesopotamian poem that recounts his tale is a Semitic composition, the creation of the Akkadian people who supplanted the Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia in the late third and early second millennia BCE.

Kings Gilgamesh and David are also both celebrated in their stories as particularly valiant warriors, in fact, as warriors whose heroic abilities are really larger than life. Gilgamesh is lauded in his Epic as

“the greatest among kings,” whose bravery and might surpass any other’s;⁴ thus he is able to kill fearsome monsters that the Epic implies would otherwise never have been defeated. David, likewise, is portrayed as an extraordinarily powerful combatant, said to have killed tens of thousands in battle before he even assumes his throne, while to Saul, who was king at the time and so more plausibly would have been represented as David’s superior, is ascribed the killing of only thousands. Similarly, in the descriptions of the wars he undertakes after he becomes king, David is said to triumph over a phenomenal number of enemy soldiers, killing twenty-two thousand from the troops of the Aramaeans of Damascus and taking another twenty-thousand soldiers and seventeen hundred horsemen from the Aramaean state of Zobah. David furthermore, like Gilgamesh, is able to defeat a particularly fearsome foe that no others had even dared to approach: the enormous Philistine champion Goliath.⁵

Gilgamesh and David are, in addition, both depicted by the ancient world’s storytellers as wanderer kings, kings, that is, who are separated from their royal fiefdoms (or, in David’s case, from his royal fiefdom to be) for long periods while they journey in the wilderness. As W. T. H. Jackson has pointed out, this is a relatively distinctive feature in the traditional literatures of, at least, Western cultures; more typically, in the Western literary corpus, the king is a sedentary figure who stays at home, while nonroyal heroes go forth from the royal court to undertake great adventures (as in, for example, the British stories of King Arthur, who resides in Camelot while the knights of his Round Table ride forth to act on his behalf).⁶ Another feature also relatively distinctive in the stories of both Gilgamesh and David is the fact that each of these hero-kings has a particularly close relationship with a heroic companion, Gilgamesh with a comrade, Enkidu, who was specially created for Gilgamesh by the gods, and David with Jonathan, the son of his royal predecessor, King Saul. Enkidu and Jonathan, moreover, both die tragic and untimely deaths, and Gilgamesh and David, both devastated by these losses, lament them bitterly. The terms of these lament are strikingly similar. Toward the end of the Epic of Gilgamesh Gilgamesh bewails the death of Enkidu by describing him as “my friend, whom I loved dearly.”⁷ Similarly, toward the end of the narratives that describe his ascent to the combined throne of Israel and Judah, the king-to-be David mourns deeply the death of Jonathan, whose “love to me was wonderful,” David states, indeed, “greater,” to David, “than the love of women.”⁸



Commentators have puzzled over these two expressions of heroic love. For some, the comparison between Jonathan's love and the love of women that David offers, along with the Bible's use of other emotionally charged language and images of physical intimacy in its descriptions of David's and Jonathan's interactions, suggests that these two heroes' relationship must be understood as erotic and perhaps even sexual in nature. Likewise, in the Epic of Gilgamesh the loving relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu is at several points portrayed using language and imagery that many scholars have analyzed as eroticized and perhaps sexual as well. Others, however, would not describe either the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu or the relationship of David and Jonathan using the categories of eroticism or sex, claiming instead that the relationships represent only a kind of intense male bonding that these interpreters take to be typical of heroic friendships in the ancient world. As I hope to show in some of the discussion that follows, there are compelling arguments to be made in favor of both these positions, in large part, I will argue, because of the exceptionally ambiguous ways in which erotic and potentially sexual language and imagery are deployed in both the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical story of David and Jonathan. In fact, so ambiguous is the erotic and potentially sexual language and imagery used in the Gilgamesh tradition and in the David story that it might seem that the scholarly argument I have just sketched *in nuce* is one that is doomed to continue without resolution for at least the foreseeable future, the lack of straightforward evidence in the texts of the Gilgamesh Epic and the David story regarding the nature of their heroes' relationships precluding, for now at any rate, our ability to offer a definitive interpretation.

Still, in this book it will be my contention that, however ambiguous, we need not be doomed to argue inconclusively about the nature of the relationships of either Gilgamesh and Enkidu or David and Jonathan. Rather, I will propose we can develop explanations that satisfactorily account for the Gilgamesh Epic's and the David story's eroticized and perhaps even sexualized language and images. Indeed, it will be my contention that although a seeming point of frustration for interpreters, the ambiguity of the texts' erotic and sexual language and images needs to be understood as an *integral* and even *critical* feature of the tales their ancient narrators are trying to tell and the conclusions these narrators hope to promote. Which is to say: it will be my contention in this book that the use of erotic and sexual ambiguity in both the stories of Gilgamesh and David is ultimately not an impediment but a key—perhaps even *the* key—to the interpretation of these texts.

It will further be my contention, though, that, if we are to unpack and

eventually to understand the ways in which ambiguously erotic and sexual language and imagery are integral to the Gilgamesh and David narratives, we will need to be far more attentive than have commentators previously to several features of the ancient Near Eastern world of which Mesopotamia and Israel were a part. First, I believe we must attend more to the nature of sex in the ancient Near Eastern world, or, to be more specific, attend more to the dynamics of sexual relationships in the ancient Near Eastern world, by which I mean both the ways in which sexual roles in the ancient Near East were conceptualized by the peoples of that region and the hierarchical means by which the ancient Near East's sexual relations were structured. Second, I believe we must attend more to issues of gender, which is to say, both the gendered language and imagery that can be used by the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical story of David to describe their heroes (what does it mean, for example, for David to compare Jonathan's love for him to the love of women?) and also the ways in which the Gilgamesh Epic and the David story each represent their heroes' erotic and sexual interactions with members of the opposite sex. Finally, and most important, I believe we must pay careful attention to issues of literary construction: what is it about each story's compositional framework and thematic objectives that leads the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical story of David to depict their heroes using arguably eroticized and sexualized representations? David M. Halperin has raised doubts about the interpretive strategies that have conventionally been used to analyze the heroic relationships described in the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical story of David: the appreciative (how beautifully within each text the heroes' relationship is portrayed) and the documentary (what each text might tell us about the nature of heroic interactions within the culture and the era it purports to describe).⁹ This is a concern I share, and in this study I aim to eschew these appreciative and documentary approaches in favor of an analysis that considers foremost each story's narrative agenda.

My ultimate goal, then, in the chapters that follow is to explain the eroticized and sexualized depictions of the heroic relationships of the Mesopotamian King Gilgamesh and his comrade Enkidu and the biblical King David and his companion Jonathan within the context of ancient Near Eastern conceptions of sex and sexuality; within the context of the Gilgamesh Epic's and the David story's depictions of gender roles and gender relationships; and, most important, within the context of the Gilgamesh Epic's and the David story's literary structures. I will begin in [chapter 1](#) by considering the ways in which sexual interactions were construed generally in the ancient Near Eastern world and, more broadly speaking, in the ancient world of the Eastern Mediterranean. Then, in [chapter 2](#), I will briefly introduce the

Epic of Gilgamesh before turning, in [chapter 3](#), to describe the language and imagery of the Epic that suggest eroticism and even the sexual. In [chapters 4](#) and [5](#) I will explore in detail my interpretation of the erotic, sexual, and also gender imagery of the Gilgamesh Epic, before turning to introduce, in [chapter 6](#), the biblical story of David and Jonathan. Then, in [chapters 7](#) and [8](#), I will offer the same sort of detailed reading of the erotic and sexual imagery found in the David and Jonathan story that I earlier advanced regarding the erotic and sexual imagery of the Gilgamesh Epic. I will further consider, in [chapter 8](#), gender imagery within the David and Jonathan story, imagery that I will comment on briefly in the epilogue as well. Throughout, I have tried, in addition to introducing my own interpretations, to make reference to the most up-to-date bibliography, but I regret to say that A. R. George's two-volume critical edition of the Gilgamesh Epic did not appear in print in time for me to make use of it before this book went to press.¹⁰



I have been helped by many in my work on this volume, and it is a great joy to offer them my thanks here: first, Dartmouth College, whose award of a Senior Faculty Grant during the academic year 2001–2002 gave me the time away from the classroom I needed in order to complete my manuscript's initial draft; second, the librarians at Dartmouth's Baker-Berry Library, in particular Patricia Carter of the Interlibrary Loan Office and William Fontaine in the Reference Department, both of whom have been tireless in their efforts to procure for me the often obscure materials I have required for the execution of my project; third, the many students who have discussed with me my interpretations of the Gilgamesh Epic and the David story in classes on ancient Near Eastern mythology and on the Hebrew Bible that I have taught over the years; and fourth, my family and many friends at Dartmouth and elsewhere, who have been beyond generous in providing me with good counsel, good cheer, and good wine. These include George and Peggy Ackerman, Michael Bronski, Andrew Corbin, Sheila Culbert, William Dever, Mona Domosh, Steve and Elizabeth Dycus, Susannah Heschel, Amy Hollywood, Michael Lowenthal, Reed Lowrie, Jim McQuillan, Peter Machinist, Frank Magilligan, Carol Meyers, Susan Niditch, Saul Olyan, William Propp, Laura Smoller, Richard Voos, Neal Walls, and Richard Wright. Finally, I must extend my thanks to the members of the Department of Religion at Dartmouth College, both past and present, who in reading [chapters 4](#) and [5](#) will immediately recognize the enormous debt I owe to them

and to the comparative analysis of hero stories that we have jointly undertaken in our team-taught introductory course Patterns of Religious Experience. It is with deep pleasure that I express my gratitude to them for this as well as for the many other good ideas and good times we have been able to share during the fifteen years I have spent as their colleague.

OF GREETING CARDS AND METHODS: UNDERSTANDING ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SEX



A few years ago, a former student of mine, one who knew of my interest in hero stories from the ancient Near East, sent me a greeting card.¹ The card features a painting of the biblical heroes David and Jonathan, standing side by side. This painting is rendered in Romanesque or early Gothic style, with David's and Jonathan's heads ringed by the sorts of golden haloes that typically adorn biblical paragons in medieval Christian art. At the painting's top, a similarly haloed Christ, framed within a heavenly cloudbank, looks benevolently down upon the two companions and extends his hands in a gesture of blessing. Yet despite all these characters' haloes, and despite some other archaizing features, the painting is clearly recent in its execution, as is most obviously indicated by the fact that both David and Jonathan hold parchment scrolls on which are inscribed quotes written in perfectly idiomatic modern English: on Jonathan's, "Keep your sacred promise and be loyal to me"; on David's, "How wonderful was your love for me." David's quote is echoed on the back side of the card, where the biblical story of David's and Jonathan's relationship and of Jonathan's tragic and untimely death is briefly recounted. The recital concludes, "When Jonathan ... [was] slain, David mourned for Jonathan with these words":²

O Jonathan, in your death I am stricken,
I am desolate for you, Jonathan, my brother.
Very dear to me you were,
your love to me more wonderful
than the love of a woman.

The card's text then continues:

Times have changed since these events were recorded, and such intense love between two men makes many uncomfortable in our day. For gay men who struggle to remain within the Judaeo-Christian

tradition, however, the love between Jonathan and David is an inspiration and strength.



Ever since I received this greeting card from my former student, I have found it difficult to know what to make of it. On the one hand, I support its larger political agenda. Indeed, I have been actively involved in gay rights work over the years, especially at the college where I teach. I was co-convenor of the coalition that helped establish a domestic-partner benefits program for my college's gay and lesbian employees, and I worked as part of that same coalition to persuade the local United Way—whose fund-raising efforts on my campus are extensive—to drop its support of area organizations that discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. I also helped to establish a staff position in my college's student services area that works to address the needs of our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students, and I co-taught the two initial offerings of my college's Introduction to Gay and Lesbian Studies course.

As a biblical scholar, moreover, I have been especially concerned with the specific gay rights issue that the greeting card addresses: the way in which the Bible is used to discuss the place of gay men and lesbians within today's Jewish and Christian communities of faith and, more generally, the way in which the Bible is used to discuss the place of gay men and lesbians within contemporary society. I have recently been concerned, for example, with the way the Bible was used in the debates surrounding the civil unions legislation that became law on July 1, 2000, in the state of Vermont, just across the Connecticut River from the small New Hampshire town in which I live. This legislation allows gay and lesbian couples to enter into relationships that are legally recognized by the state and thereby to receive from the Vermont government the same state-law benefits and protections that are available to opposite-sex couples through marriage.

To be sure, during the long process that brought the civil unions law into being,³ Vermont state officials repeatedly reminded Vermonters that the Bible, and religion overall, had no place in their discussions. Rather, the issue, as had been made clear in a December 1999 ruling by the Vermont Supreme Court, was constitutional—that under the common benefits clause of the Vermont State Constitution same-sex partners had to be provided with a system of legal association that offered the same rights and privileges Vermont accords to married couples. Yet, even though the Bible and religion officially had no place in Vermonters' debates over civil unions, the Bible and religion were on

call quite a bit, from the chambers of the statehouse where the civil unions statute was being drafted to the Letters to the Editor section of our local paper. Shortly after the civil unions bill passed I was asked to write a brief commentary about the ways the Bible had been evoked in the discussions that took place in these and other forums,⁴ and I have subsequently spoken frequently on the topic.

The gist of my comments on these occasions has basically been the same as the caution Vermont state officials issued to Vermonters during their civil unions debates: the Bible really has no place in discussions about gay and lesbian rights in our contemporary society. But while Vermont state officials sought to disallow discussion of the Bible on constitutional grounds, my reservations stem from a different source: the bounty of research produced by scholars of gay and lesbian studies during the past twenty or so years that tells us that our society's notion of homosexuality, or, more precisely, of homosexual identity, is just that—*ours*—a historically and culturally contingent product of our particular time and place. Homosexuality as we conceive of it is thus not something that should be, or even can be, discussed using data that come from the texts and traditions of societies far removed from ours, including those societies that were extant in the modern-day regions of Palestine and Israel during the first millennium BCE and the first century of our era and that produced the corpus of writings we now know as the Bible. To put the matter somewhat more bluntly: the Bible, rooted as it is in an era long ago and a location far away, is simply not in a position to address the phenomenon we in the Euro-American West speak of today as homosexuality.

Now, this is not to claim, let me quickly make clear, that erotic and sexual acts involving same-sex partners were not found in the societies of the biblical world, nor is it to claim that same-sex erotic and sexual interactions are not found in many (if not most) societies other than our own. Rather, the available evidence suggests just the opposite, that erotic and sexual interactions between persons of the same sex are attested in almost all cultures known to us from across time and across the globe. Thus the British historian Jeffrey Weeks can write that same-sex coupling has existed “throughout history, in all types of society, among all social classes and peoples.” Weeks continues, however, by noting that “what have varied enormously” are the ways in which different societies have regarded same-sex erotic and sexual interactions: the ways, for example, in which societies have responded to same-sex interactions—“qualified approval, indifference and the most vicious persecution”—but, more important, the meanings these societies have attached to same-sex erotic and sexual acts and the manner in which those who engage in same-sex erotic and sexual

interactions have viewed themselves.⁵

More specifically, according to Weeks and theorists like him: while same-sex erotic and sexual interactions may be ubiquitous among cultures, a sense that participation in these interactions demarcates one as having a homosexual identity is not. It is not at all clear, that is, that cultures other than our own have understood those who participated in same-sex erotic and sexual interactions to belong to a distinct class or category of people whom we would define as homosexuals, individuals who have “most of [their] erotic needs met in interactions with persons of the same sex”⁶ and who also tend to belong to a subculture—what we today often call the gay community—that is made up of other such erotically driven individuals and is distinct and distinguishable from the surrounding society.⁷ Rather, researchers suggest that our impulse to categorize all those who engage primarily or even substantially in same-sex erotic and sexual interactions as a distinct and identifiable type of person, homosexuals, who have a distinct and identifiable way of living in the world, is a creation or construction of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Euro-American discourse. Indeed, those who advocate this sort of position are typically labeled by the rubric social constructionists because of their fundamental conviction that our notion of a homosexual (and, for that matter, heterosexual) identity is a social construct, the effect of social conditioning. Hence it has virtually no constancy across cultures, in the same way social conditioning about many other aspects of our identities is inconstant across cultural space and time—most famously, perhaps, social conditioning regarding gender identity and what constitutes normative masculine and feminine behavior.⁸

The initial evidence that many social constructionists advance in favor of the theory of the homosexual as a distinct and novel creation of modern Euro-American society is linguistic: the fact that the very terms *homosexual* and *homosexuality* (and their classificatory analogs, *heterosexual* and *heterosexuality*) are recent creations, products of late nineteenth-century scientific discourse. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement*, the earliest occurrence of the terms *homosexual* and *homosexuality* in an English publication was in 1892,⁹ when the words were used by Charles Gilbert Chaddock in his translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s handbook of sexual deviance, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study*.¹⁰ It was not Krafft-Ebing, however, who coined these terms’ German predecessors, *Homosexual* and *Homosexualität*; this was the writer Karl Maria Kertbeny, who, as part of his efforts to decriminalize same-sex sexual encounters in Germany, first used the word *Homosexual*, and also the neologism *Heterosexual*, in a private letter to the sex-law reformer, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, on May

6, 1868.¹¹ Kertbeny subsequently introduced the term *Homosexual* and the related terms *Homosexualität*, “homosexuality,” and *Homosexualismus*, “homosexualism,” into public discourse in 1869, in two anonymous pamphlets that argued against the adoption of an “unnatural fornication” law throughout Germany. Kertbeny’s friend, the Stuttgart zoology professor Gustav Jäger, later took up Kertbeny’s language of *Homosexualität* and popularized it in the second (1880) edition of his *Die Entdeckung der Seele*, and it was from Jäger that Krafft-Ebing learned the word and incorporated an adjectival form of it (*homosexuale Idiosynkrasie*, “homosexual idiosyncrasy”) into the second and subsequent editions of his *Psychopathia Sexualis*.¹² From there, as already noted, the terms *homosexual* and *homosexuality* (and their heterosexual counterparts) traveled into the English lexicon. The classicist David M. Halperin therefore speaks in his 1986 essay “One Hundred Years of Homosexuality” of the “invention of homosexuality,” at least in the English-speaking world, by Chaddock in 1892,¹³ and the historian Jonathan Ned Katz in his 1995 book *The Invention of Heterosexuality* similarly writes of the “debut” of the heterosexual in the late nineteenth-century prose of Krafft-Ebing.¹⁴

Just because the words do not exist to describe a particular phenomenon, however, does not mean that phenomenon is not present among us. As critics of social construction theory have pointed out, gravity did not come into being only when Newton provided us with a description of its properties,¹⁵ and “people had blood types before blood types were discovered.”¹⁶ Or, to take an example closer to the field of inquiry that is the subject of this book, it seems evident to those of us who specialize in the study of the Hebrew Bible that we can speak of the religion (or probably better religions) of ancient Israel,¹⁷ despite the fact that there is no word in biblical Hebrew for this concept.¹⁸ And so, analogously, can we not speak of heterosexuals and homosexuals as distinct categories of persons that existed before the words that describe them were coined at end of the nineteenth century? Indeed, can we not speak of heterosexuals and homosexuals as distinct categories of persons that are at least implicitly, if not explicitly, present in all cultures? That is, whatever the relative novelty of the terminology, can we not speak of heterosexual and homosexual identities as universal, intrinsic, natural, and essential facts of what it is to be sexual within the human community?

I will return to this so-called essentialist argument below, and its place in ancient Near Eastern and especially biblical scholarship, but for the moment let me focus on the social constructionists’ response to these sorts of questions, which can be summarized by the phrase “words are clues to concepts.”¹⁹ Which is to say: that there are no words to categorize people as homosexual or heterosexual before the

late nineteenth century suggests to the constructionists that those who lived before this time did not conceive of a social universe that divided its inhabitants into homosexual and heterosexual individuals. Again, this is not to say there were no same-sex erotic and sexual interactions before the end of the nineteenth century; quite the contrary. Rather, the social constructionists' claim is that prior to the introduction of the term *homosexual* and its heterosexual analog, "sex-differences, eroticism, and reproduction" were arranged "in ways substantially different" from the way we categorize these things today.²⁰ As Halperin writes, "although there are persons who seek sexual contact with other persons of the same sex in many different societies, only recently and only in some sectors of our own society have such persons—or some portion of them—been homosexuals."²¹ Even more forthright is this statement of the historian Robert Padgug: "'Homosexual' and 'heterosexual' *behavior* may be universal; homosexual and heterosexual *identity and consciousness* are modern realities.... To 'commit' a homosexual act is one thing; to *be* a homosexual is something entirely different."²²

In order to substantiate these claims, Halperin, Padgug, and social constructionists like them turn from their linguistic observations to introduce a second major line of argumentation, which is to bring forward ethnographic data that come from prior to the late nineteenth century, or from outside our Euro-American matrix, or both, in order to illustrate different cultures' "substantially different" arrangements of sexual categories.²³ Halperin, for example, turns almost immediately from the introductory proposition of his essay, "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality"—that "before 1892 there was no homosexuality"—to cite George Chauncey's study of United States medical literature from the early to mid-nineteenth century, "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance."²⁴ In this article Chauncey documents, first, the prevailing language used for behavior that was considered sexually deviant throughout most of the nineteenth century, the language of sexual inversion. He then, and for our purposes more importantly, goes on to describe how the nineteenth century's understanding of this deviant sexual inversion "did not denote the same conceptual phenomenon as homosexuality." Rather, sexual inversion "referred to a broad range of deviant gender behavior," which could be manifest by what was considered deviant object choice (the choice of a same-sex sexual partner), but also (in men) by a fondness for cats or (in women) by a predilection for politics.²⁵ Halperin summarizes, "Throughout the nineteenth century ... sexual preference for a person of one's own sex was not clearly distinguished from other sorts of non-conformity to one's culturally defined sex-role."²⁶

Similarly, Katz, in his *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, illustrates his contention that the words *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality* signify a “time-bound historical form—one historically specific way of organizing the sexes and their pleasures” by looking to the data collected by historians John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman on the romantic friendships that existed in the United States in the early nineteenth century.²⁷ Middle-class women especially “formed close attachments that could rival marriage relationships in their personal intensity.”²⁸ These women’s relationships included expressions of physical intimacy—holding hands, kissing, and caressing—although typically not genital stimulation, as is suggested, for example, by these lines from an 1859 novel quoted by D’Emilio and Freedman:

Women often love each other with as much fervor and excitement as they do men. When this is the case ... the emotions awakened heave and swell through the whole being as the tides swell the ocean. Freed from all the grosser elements of passion, as it exists between the sexes, it retains its energy, its abandonment, its flush, its eagerness, its palpitation, and its rapture.

So is this highly eroticized, albeit nongenital love—described in the same passage as being “not only in *degree* as between man and woman, but in *kind* as between precisely similar organizations”—to be classified as homosexual?²⁹ D’Emilio and Freedman respond by invoking a social constructionist analysis: “The modern terms *homosexuality* and *heterosexuality* do not apply to an era that had not yet articulated these distinctions.”³⁰

The most persuasive ethnographic data, however, that Halperin and Katz (among many others) bring to bear to illustrate their social constructionist claims come from ancient Greece,³¹ and Halperin, a classicist, is particularly masterful in his discussion. He begins by offering a close reading of the famous myth regarding human origins that is attributed to Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*.³² In this text Aristophanes is said to claim that there were originally three sexes of human beings, male, female, and androgyne. These original humans, according to Aristophanes, were globular in shape, with eight limbs, four ears, two faces, and two sets of genitals, one front and one back. These humans also, in Aristophanes’ tale, were very powerful, so powerful that the god Zeus, in order to constrain them, cut them in half. These severed halves, as the story goes, sought desperately to reunite with their other, so much so that once reunited the halves devoted all their energies to sustaining a perpetual embrace. As a result, they neglected other bodily needs and thus began to perish for lack of sustenance. Zeus at that point took pity on the halves and so moved

their genitals around to the front sides of their bodies and invented sexual intercourse, which allowed the creatures to find “some satiety of their union and a relief” in order that they “might turn their hands to their labors and their interest in ordinary life.”³³ The consequence is three types of sexual congress: males who seek other males (the two halves of the original globe-shaped male), females who seek other females (the two halves of the original globe-shaped female), and males and females who seek each other (the two halves of the original androgyne).

This typology of erotic interactions, Halperin admits, may look superficially like our division of sexual congress into homosexuality and heterosexuality. But Halperin argues a closer examination reveals that it is not. He points out first that, contrary to what our homosexual-versus-heterosexual distinction assumes, there is nothing in Aristophanes’ story that supposes the males who seek other males and the females who seek other females to be of a common type (what we would call homosexual). Nor is there anything that supposes a contrast between these males who seek other males and the females who seek other females, on the one hand, and the third type of sexual being (what we would call heterosexual), on the other. In Halperin’s words, “nothing in the text allows us to suspect the existence of even an implicit category to which males who desire males and females who desire females *both* belong in contradistinction to some other category containing males and females who desire one another.”³⁴

Moreover, Halperin goes on to argue, Aristophanes’ myth “features a crucial distinction *within* the category of males who are attracted to males, an infrastructural detail missing from his descriptions of each of the other two categories.” This is Aristophanes’ insistence that the males who desire other males are not attracted to one another “*without qualification*”; rather, “those descended from an original male ... desire boys when they are men and they take a certain (nonsexual) pleasure in physical contact with men when they are boys.” Halperin, in somewhat of an understatement, describes this insistence on age dissymmetry on Aristophanes’ part as “unexpected,” pointing out that “although his [Aristophanes’] genetic explanation of the diversity of sexual-object choice among human beings would seem to require that there be some adult males who are sexually attracted to other adult males, Aristophanes appears to be wholly unaware of such a possibility, and in any case has left no room for it in his taxonomic scheme.” Reciprocated erotic desire between adult male partners is not admitted in Aristophanes’ myth, that is, and this despite the fact that Aristophanes’ own representation of the constitution of human sexual interactions would seem to imply it. This suggests, by extension, that as indicated above, homosexuals as we define them

—“pairs of lovers of the same sex and [roughly] the same age animated by mutual desire for one another”—are not, at least among males, present in the Aristophanes tale.³⁵

Halperin next points out a further implication of this analysis: that the absence of what we define as homosexuals, or at least male homosexuals, in Aristophanes' myth demonstrates the absence of what we define as homosexuality, or at least male homosexuality, in the world of classical Athens from which Aristophanes' tale stems. This is because Aristophanes' myth is, in terms of genre, an etiological fable, “a projection of contemporary practices backwards in time to their imagined point of origin.”³⁶ What Aristophanes describes in terms of the beginnings of human sexuality, that is, is what Athenians were actually doing sexually during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Elsewhere in his essay Halperin elaborates by explaining that in classical Athens sex generally—whether involving same-sex or opposite-sex partners—was conceived of not as we understand it, an act jointly engaged in by two partners, but rather as an act that is described in terms of use, more specifically, the use to which a desiring subject (to be understood as male) puts the object of his sexual desire.³⁷ Halperin contrasts in this regard our idiom “to have sex *with* someone,” which implies an act in which partners mutually participate, and the Greek idiom, in which the verb “to have sex” (*aphrodiziazerein*) is “carefully differentiated into an active and a passive form.” This is an indication—and one notes again here the constructionist conviction that words are clues to concepts—that sex in the classical worldview is understood *not* according to our notions of mutuality, but as “an action performed by one person [active] upon another [passive].” The sexual action performed, moreover, is rigidly defined in the Athenian system as penile penetration, meaning obviously, as intimated already, that the sexual actor—or active partner—is male. More important, the active partner must be a certain kind of male, one who is in a socially superior position to the penetrated. Hence, as Halperin writes, the most socially superior of Athenians, “an adult, male citizen of Athens,” can have “legitimate sexual relations only with statutory minors (his inferiors not in age but in social and political status): the proper targets of his sexual desire include, specifically, women, boys, foreigners, and slaves—all of them persons who do not enjoy the same legal rights and privileges as he does.”³⁸

Athenian sexual practices are thus isomorphic (to use Halperin's word) with Athenian social status and, more generally, with Athenian political life, so that any sexual interactions consistent with the Athenians' hierarchical principles of social and political organization are considered normative—whether they would be described by us as

heterosexual (and typically in our society normative) or homosexual (and typically in our society deviant). What is considered aberrant in this Athenian system, however, is “sex between members of the superordinate group,” that is, sex between two adult male citizens. Indeed, in Halperin’s words, this type of sexual relation is “virtually inconceivable.”³⁹ Halperin concludes: “The currently fashionable distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality (and, similarly, between ‘homosexuals’ and ‘heterosexuals’ as individual types) had no meaning for the classical Athenians: there were not, as far as they knew, two different kinds of ‘sexuality,’ two differently structured psychosexual states or modes of affective orientation.” Rather, the taxonomic distinction that described sexual identity in ancient Athens was “‘active’ and ‘passive,’ dominant and submissive.”⁴⁰ For at least some Athenians, moreover, their active or passive sexual identity was mutable, rather than being—as an essentialist argument might have it—intrinsic, natural, and therefore unchanging. In particular, males eligible for citizenship, although they would have been typologically passive in their youth, would become typologically active upon attaining their majority and entering into a superior social status within the body politic.⁴¹

So carefully does Halperin argue this position, and so meticulously does he amass evidence from classical sources to prove his contention that “‘sexuality’ is a cultural production,” that even he speaks of the debate between his social constructionist convictions and the alternative position of essentialism as potentially sterile.⁴² Similarly, in her 1999 book *Getting Medieval*, a provocative examination of sex and communities in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century England, Carolyn Dinshaw, a professor of Middle English language and culture at New York University, writes of “these days in the late 1990s in which we may have tired of the essentialism/social constructionism debate.”⁴³ Still, I have chosen to spend a fair amount of time on the social constructionist position here because it seems to me it is not necessarily so widely embraced as Halperin’s and Dinshaw’s comments might suggest. The anthropologist Carole S. Vance, for example, in an essay published in 1995, comments that an essentialist approach to sexuality “remains hegemonic,”⁴⁴ and Katz, writing in the same year, speaks similarly of how “the idea ... of an essential homosexuality and heterosexuality still functions as the dominant working notion, even of historically oriented researchers.”⁴⁵ Certainly this seems to me to be true among the historically oriented researchers within my own area of scholarly interest and the area of scholarly interest that this book primarily considers, the world of biblical Israel and the ancient Near East. In fact, in looking at studies that address the Bible’s attitudes toward same-sex erotic and sexual

interactions, I am struck by how pervasive the essentialist understanding of sexuality is.⁴⁶



One of the earliest⁴⁷ and most formidable spokespersons for an essentialist approach regarding the Bible's attitudes toward same-sex erotic and sexual interactions was the late John Boswell of the Department of History at Yale University, in his 1980 book *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*.⁴⁸ As Boswell's subtitle makes clear, he is convinced that there were "gay people" long before the invention of homosexuality that Halperin dates to 1892, and that "gay people" is in fact a categorical constant that extends in time over, at least, the first fourteen centuries of Western European history.⁴⁹ The claim within the text itself is broader still, projecting the category *gay* back to the fifth century BCE and into the Eastern Mediterranean, so that Boswell readily speaks, for example, of the "gay Athenians" attested within classical literature,⁵⁰ of the "gay relationships" of Athens,⁵¹ and of Aristophanes' descriptions of "gay and nongay men and women" in the *Symposium*'s myth of human origins that I have described above.⁵² Indeed, in the concluding comments of what could be called his preliminary methodological discussion (chapter 2, "Definitions"),⁵³ Boswell implies what he elsewhere states more clearly,⁵⁴ that "the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy exists in speech and thought because it exists in reality: it was not invented by sexual taxonomists, but observed by them."⁵⁵

For the biblical scholar, however, the most salient demonstration of Boswell's fundamentally essentialist position is found in his exegesis of Rom 1:26–27. These verses are a part of the passage in Paul's Letter to the Romans that presents the apostle's arguments regarding the sins of the Gentiles and consequently their need for salvation.⁵⁶ From Paul's point of view, the fundamental sin was the Gentiles' failure to "know God," despite the fact that they should have been able to infer the nature and power of the creator through the glory of the creation. "For this reason," Paul writes in Rom 1:26–27 (NRSV translation):

God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Arguments rage over what Paul means by natural and unnatural in these verses. Does natural refer to some universal law or moral truth that proscribes homosexuality? Does unnatural refer to that which is peculiar, extraordinary, unconventional, unexpected, as are same-sex erotic and sexual interactions in most societies? Do natural and unnatural here have nothing to do with same-sex interactions but refer rather to what was considered natural as opposed to unnatural in opposite-sex couplings, with vaginal intercourse being considered natural, whereas anal and oral intercourse were considered unnatural? Perhaps unnatural might refer to bestiality? To a basically natural activity taken to an extreme? To sexual intercourse that cannot lead to procreation? Or do natural and unnatural refer to the specific Greek and also Roman notions of what constitutes natural and unnatural sexual interactions, natural interactions, as described above, being those that involved a socially superior penetrator and a socially inferior penetrated, unnatural interactions being those that somehow violated this hierarchical mandate (as would, by necessity, the sorts of female-female sexual interactions the word *unnatural* is used in Rom 1:26 to describe)?⁵⁷

Currently, among scholars, there is no consensus. What is crucial for our purposes at this point, however, is not the merits or flaws of these and other positions but Boswell's particular take, which is to argue that natural and unnatural in Rom 1:26–27 refer to the nature of the sexual preference that Boswell sees as intrinsic to each of us as individuals: some of us are naturally (intrinsically, fundamentally, essentially) heterosexual, others naturally (intrinsically, fundamentally, essentially) homosexual.⁵⁸ What Paul condemns as unnatural, Boswell goes on to propose, are those who act against the heterosexual orientation that is characteristic or natural for them or “homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons.” Paul was not, Boswell concludes, “discussing persons who were by inclination [or we might say, essentially] gay.”⁵⁹

This and other aspects of Boswell's interpretation of Rom 1:26–27 have been cited again and again, typically with approval, in works on the Bible and same-sex eroticism that come from outside the guild of biblical scholars,⁶⁰ especially in works that attempt to read the Bible in a way that is ultimately redemptive rather than judgmental for contemporary gay men and lesbians who are members of biblically based communities of faith.⁶¹ For example, Chris Glaser, the one-time director of the Lazarus project, “a ministry of reconciliation between the [Presbyterian] church and the lesbian and gay community,”⁶² writes in his book *Come Home! Reclaiming Spirituality and Community as Gay Men and Lesbians* that Rom 1:26–27 critiques only “behavior that gays and lesbians themselves have been critical of ... heterosexuals

behaving homosexually.”⁶³ Peter J. Gomes, the Pusey Minister of the Memorial Church and Appleton Chapel and the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard University, relies on Boswell to reach a similar conclusion in his *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*: Rom 1:26–27, Gomes writes, “does not describe the conduct of homosexuals, but rather of heterosexual people who performed homosexual acts ... what is ‘unnatural’ is the one behaving after the manner of the other.”⁶⁴ Likewise, John J. McNeill, a Roman Catholic priest who was “expelled from the Society of Jesus in 1987 for refusing to give up his ministry to gay men and lesbians,”⁶⁵ states in his *The Church and the Homosexual* that he agrees with Boswell that “Paul apparently refers only to homosexual acts indulged in by those he considered to be otherwise heterosexually inclined; acts which represented a voluntary choice to act contrary to their ordinary sexual appetite.”⁶⁶ Elsewhere, McNeill writes:⁶⁷

I will never forget my joy and sense of liberation when I first read John Boswell’s critique of the traditional [biblical] passages used to condemn homosexuality. I agree with Boswell that it can be established with good scholarship that nowhere in Scripture, the Old and New Testaments, is there a clear condemnation of a loving relationship between two adult gay men or two lesbians.

Scholars in the field of New Testament studies, however, have generally been less complimentary of Boswell’s work. For many, this simply has meant ignoring Boswell’s exegesis altogether.⁶⁸ For example, Victor Paul Furnish, professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, makes no reference to Boswell’s arguments in his 1994 discussion of Rom 1:26–27, although he is clearly aware of them.⁶⁹ The same is true of Ulrich W. Mauser, professor of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, in his 1996 article that considers Rom 1:26–27,⁷⁰ and of Brian K. Blount, a New Testament professor also at Princeton Theological Seminary, in an article published in the same year, “Reading and Understanding the New Testament on Homosexuality.”⁷¹ Others who do address Boswell directly, moreover, tend to find fault. Mark D. Smith, of the Department of History at Albertson College, remarks that Boswell’s “interpretations of biblical texts ... including Romans 1, have been justly criticized,”⁷² and Bernadette J. Brooten, a professor of early Christianity at Brandeis University, articulates some of this criticism by arguing, for example, that Boswell’s position on Rom 1:26–27 does not “precisely [suit] Paul’s culture.”⁷³ Furthermore, Brooten claims that the materials concerning female homoeroticism she has assembled in her magisterial *Love Between Women: Early*

Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism “run absolutely counter” to two of Boswell’s main conclusions in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*,⁷⁴ which are, in his words: 1. that “Roman society, at least in its urban centers ... regarded homosexual interest and practice as an ordinary part of the range of human eroticism” and 2. that “the early Christian church does not appear to have opposed homosexual behavior per se.”⁷⁵

The noted New Testament scholar Joseph A. Fitzmyer similarly calls Boswell’s analysis “wide of the mark,”⁷⁶ and Richard B. Hays, professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, rather more bluntly characterizes Boswell’s interpretation as “seriously flawed”⁷⁷ and even “untenable.”⁷⁸ Hays particularly points out that although Boswell’s reading of Rom 1:26–27 presupposes that “Paul is describing some specifiable group of heterosexually-oriented individuals whose personal life pilgrimage has led them beyond heterosexual activity into promiscuous homosexual behavior,” Paul’s charge (as I noted above) is instead a “corporate indictment” against “fallen humanity as a whole”; the “them” to which Rom 1:26–27 refers, that is (“For this reason, God gave *them* up to degrading passions”; emphasis mine), is not the individual members of some sexually disoriented subgroup within the larger Gentile population but the entire Gentile community. Hays also, like Brooten, suggests it is patently false for Boswell to claim the early church in general “does not appear to have opposed homosexual behavior,” noting rather that “every pertinent Christian text from the pre-Constantinian period [including Romans] ... adopts an unremittingly negative judgment on homosexual practice, and this tradition is emphatically carried forward by all major Christian writers of the fourth and fifth centuries.”⁷⁹

Still, most of these New Testament scholars, although dismissive of Boswell’s specific conclusions, never fully repudiate his underlying essentialist assumption that we can speak of homosexuality within the biblical tradition. Thus, in his 1994 article, Furnish simultaneously acknowledges that “there was no conception of what modern research calls ‘sexual orientation’” in Paul’s day but goes on to suggest that what we call sexual orientation may be shaped by biological or psychological factors, which is to say: it may be something essential or intrinsic to our nature.⁸⁰ Somewhat similarly, Mauser admits that “the notion of sexual orientation, or sexual preference,” is alien to the biblical world while still speaking of a “homosexual orientation” and “heterosexually oriented people” in biblical times.⁸¹ Moreover, he entitles one version of his 1996 article “Creation, Sexuality, and Homosexuality in the New Testament,” which seems to indicate his belief that there is something that can be identified as homosexuality in the biblical text.⁸² Mauser’s stress on creation, and, more specifically,

on the pairing male and female in Genesis 1–2, belies as well his underlying assumption that the Bible prescribes a normative model of heterosexual marriage for human sexual relations to which homosexuality somehow stands opposed. Thus, despite his disclaimers, Mauser seems to assume the biblical world shared our understanding that one is *either* heterosexual, and so in, or preferring to be in, an opposite-sex relationship, *or* homosexual, and so in, or preferring to be in, a same-sex relationship.⁸³ Hays, too, insists that the Bible's discussions of homosexuality must be read against the "backdrop" of "heterosexual marriage" as presented "from Genesis 1 onwards,"⁸⁴ likewise presuming, it seems—contrary to the arguments of, say, Halperin—that homosexuality and heterosexuality existed in the same either/or dichotomy in biblical times as they do in our world. Hays's sense that he can even speak of biblical homosexuality further suggests his fundamental conviction that there is a thing, homosexuality, within the biblical world that he can examine, and this despite the fact that he does at points speak of the concept of sexual orientation in antiquity as an "anachronism" and signals his awareness of the social constructionist versus essentialist debate.⁸⁵

These same criticisms can be leveled, moreover, against one of the most recent, and also most comprehensive, studies of the Bible and same-sex erotic and sexual acts, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, by Robert A. J. Gagnon, an associate professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. As Gagnon's title suggests, he carefully defines his subject as "*same-sex intercourse or homosexual practice*, as opposed to *homosexual orientation*," and the citation of authors such as Halperin in his footnotes might suggest Gagnon's careful delineation of his focus is due to his awareness and even acceptance of social constructionist claims. Yet, as Gagnon goes on to describe his reluctance to engage in a discussion of the Bible and "homosexual orientation," he gives as his reason *not* the social constructionist critique that sees the notion of "homosexual orientation" as a uniquely modern phenomenon but rather "the Bible's own relative disinterest toward motives or the origination of same-sex impulses."⁸⁶ For Gagnon, however, this "relative disinterest" in no way indicates that the category homosexual orientation did not exist in the ancient world; he clearly thinks that it did, taking as his starting point, like Mauser (who was Gagnon's teacher) and Hays, an either/or dichotomy of heterosexual/homosexual that he finds implicit in the Genesis creation stories. As Gagnon writes, "Scripture rejects homosexual behavior because it is a violation of the gendered existence of male and female ordained by God at creation."⁸⁷

Indeed, Gagnon seems so convinced that he can speak of

homosexuality in the ancient world that he does not even discuss the positions of Halperin or the other constructionist theorists whom he cites (for example, Michel Foucault, David F. Greenberg, and John J. Winkler), not even in the fifteen-page discussion in his book whose section heading reads (in part), “The Bible has no category for ‘homosexuals’ with an exclusively same-sex orientation,” not even in the first attempt to rebut the assertion of this heading that Gagnon offers, the evidence of Aristophanes’ myth of human origins that Halperin has so meticulously analyzed!⁸⁸ I must say: I find this failure even to address the constructionist position extremely curious, especially given the pains Gagnon takes at every other point in his book to raise objections to his proposed interpretations and answer them. I can only begin to guess at his reasons. I suppose it is possible that Gagnon omitted a discussion of the social constructionist position for lack of space, but it seems hard to imagine that a book that is already over five hundred pages long could not have taken a few more pages to consider one of modern scholarship’s major intellectual paradigms. I regret to say it, as Gagnon and I have known each other for a long time (we were classmates both as undergraduates and as masters students), but I wonder whether Gagnon’s obvious disdain for lesbians and, especially, gay men—whom he brutally caricatures as rampantly promiscuous, as irresponsible when it comes to safe sex, and as guilty of “pick-up murders” associated with anonymous sex and of high rates of alcoholism, sadomasochism, and domestic violence—means he could not bring himself to engage the arguments of scholars such as Halperin, who openly identify as gay.⁸⁹

I regret too that, in turning from Gagnon to consider Brooten’s *Love Between Women*, it might seem as if I am suggesting that Brooten’s work is akin to Gagnon’s in this or some other regard, for, in truth, it stands in a different league. Certainly, Brooten stakes out a radically different political stance with regard to how her work on the New Testament’s attitudes toward same-sex eroticism might bear on contemporary Christian debates about the church and homosexuality, for while she and Gagnon agree that the New Testament traditions, and Rom 1:26–27 in particular, do in fact condemn same-sex intercourse, Gagnon, as I have already noted, understands this condemnation as rooted in the fundamentals of creation that pertain as fully, as he sees it, within today’s biblically based communities of faith as they did in Paul’s churches. Brooten, however, argues (I believe persuasively; more on this below) that the logic that underlies Paul’s condemnation is distinctive to, and thus pertains only to, the cultural world (and therefore the church) of Paul’s own era. Brooten is also, in my opinion, more thoughtful and more judicious in her treatment of ancient sources than is Gagnon. Nevertheless, I find Brooten

unfortunately equivocal when it comes to the question on which I am focusing here: the use—and usefulness—of social construction theory for understanding the sexual relationships of the biblical and ancient Near Eastern worlds. Like Mauser and Hays, in addition to Gagnon, Brooten assumes that the phenomenon we call homosexuality can be found within the world of early Christianity on which her examination focuses; indeed, Brooten goes much further than either Mauser or Hays, and Gagnon as well, in arguing explicitly that there was “a category of persons viewed in antiquity as having a long-term or even lifelong homoerotic orientation.” In fact, according to Brooten, “people in the Roman Empire worked with a concept of homoeroticism that encompassed both men and women”; people in the Roman Empire, that is, worked with a concept very like the modern concept of homosexuality.⁹⁰

Brooten’s attempts to claim a more universal taxonomy of female, and also male homoeroticism, however, have been strongly criticized. For example, Ann Pellegrini, a specialist in gay and lesbian studies at the University of California, Irvine, writes:⁹¹

She [Brooten] seems to bring to her analyses a strong notion of what a lesbian is or should be today. But her conception of sexual love between women and lesbian identity is rooted in contemporary politics, not in the world of early Christianity. There is at best an uneasy fit between the contemporary ethical and political claims Brooten wants her book to make and the historical scene of early Christianity and its classical sources she presents. At worst, her interpretations of the ancient sources become hostage to the contemporary debates she wants her book to intervene in.

Halperin is more blunt: “Brooten’s formulation of her project ... organizes her material around the modern concept of homosexuality, redescribes the ancient phenomena in terms of it, and implies that sexuality and sexual orientation are more or less objective phenomena, independent of human perception, rooted in some transhistorical reality.” He goes on to suggest that Brooten follows in the footsteps of Boswell in this regard, by “recapitulating his realist approach to the history of sexuality ... and his insistence on the objective facts of same-sex sexual attraction.”⁹² Ironically, that is, Brooten stands accused of committing herself to a program that seems more like Boswell’s essentialist position than not, even though, as I noted earlier she presents herself as repudiating, not affirming, two of the main conclusions of Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*.

Even more ironic: although Brooten’s overall claim that we can

locate something like our modern concept of homosexuality within the Roman world of the first Christian centuries seems to represent a basically essentialist understanding of the notion of sexual identity, her more specific descriptions of Roman-era sexual relations, as well as the analysis of Rom 1:26–27 she develops based on those descriptions, echo in many respects the social constructionist position articulated by Halperin with regard to classical Athens. “A strict distinction between active and passive sexual roles governed the prevailing cultural conceptualizations of sexual relations in the Roman world,” Brooten writes; “the distinction between active and passive shaped Roman-period definitions of natural and unnatural: free, adult male citizens ought never to be passive, and women should never be active.” As she continues:

Roman-period writers presented as normative those sexual relations that represent a human social hierarchy. They saw every sexual pairing as including one active and one passive partner, regardless of gender ... males could be either active or passive (such as when they were boys or slaves), whereas females were always supposed to be passive.

Early Christian perspectives on sexual relations, she concludes, including the views of Paul, “closely resembled” this Roman understanding.⁹³ Consequently, she argues regarding Rom 1:26, “Paul condemns sexual relations between women as ‘unnatural’ because he shares the widely held cultural view that women are passive by nature and therefore should remain passive in sexual relations,” whereas “a sexual encounter necessarily includes an active and a passive partner.”⁹⁴

With respect to this part of her analysis, moreover, Brooten’s reviewers have typically been complimentary, including (yet another irony) some of the same reviewers who criticized her essentialist claims regarding a Roman-era conception of homosexuality that in many respects parallels our own. For example, T. Corey Brennan, currently a member of the Department of Classics at Rutgers University, writes that “*Love between Women* succeeds in its main argument” that Paul condemns sexual relations between women as unnatural because they do not conform and cannot conform—women being passive by nature—to the Greco-Roman cultural model that Paul assumes: that all sexual interactions must necessarily include an active and a passive partner.⁹⁵ Ken Stone, who teaches Hebrew Bible at Chicago Theological Seminary, likewise notes that he finds Brooten’s interpretation of Rom 1:26 “generally persuasive,”⁹⁶ as does David G. Hunter, a specialist in the field of early Christianity who is

currently professor of religious studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Iowa State University.⁹⁷ Even more noteworthy are the comments of another specialist in early Christianity, Elizabeth A. Castelli of Barnard College, who has published extensively on issues of women and gender in the early church. Castelli characterizes Brooten's work on Rom 1:26 as "explicitly positioned against Christian apologetics such as those that have tried to reclaim Paul's assessments of homoeroticism in a liberatory mode" (Boswell comes to mind) and goes on to describe Brooten as making "a more radical claim: that Paul's assessment of female homoeroticism is clearly pejorative [and] that Paul's anti-homoerotic polemic is built upon a thoroughgoing commitment to a gender-stratified society"—that is, again, a commitment to the notion that women are passive by nature and so must remain passive in all sexual interactions. And the merits of this interpretation? Castelli concludes: "Brooten's exegesis of Paul is painstaking, demanding, and persuasive."⁹⁸ I agree.

Other New Testament scholars who in my opinion persuasively bring a social constructionist analysis to bear on Rom 1:26–27 include David E. Fredrickson, professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, who in an article on Rom 1:24–27 characterizes the dichotomy of homo/heterosexuality as exclusively modern;⁹⁹ Stanley K. Stowers, professor of religious studies at Brown University; and Dale B. Martin, professor of New Testament studies at Yale. Stowers's discussion is found in his 1994 book *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles*. In chapter 2 of this work he notes generally regarding the ideology of sexual interactions found throughout the ancient Mediterranean world that "there is always a passive and an active partner" and "women are the natural passive partners."¹⁰⁰ Then, as he turns in chapter 3 to focus on the references to same-sex intercourse in Rom 1:26–27, he writes that "using the modern term *homosexuality* would invite serious misunderstanding because the concept implies many things about sex and gender that are utterly foreign to antiquity."¹⁰¹ The view of the ancient world, he reiterates, understands sex and gender wholly in relation to the dichotomy of active and passive, and women, as naturally passive, can only properly have sexual relations with men, who are more naturally active: from this stems Paul's censure of female-female same-sex acts in Rom 1:26. Stowers's point here is, obviously, similar to Brooten's, and Stowers, also like Brooten, notes that the ancient world's active-passive dichotomy mirrors the ancients' ideology of social status: "natural sex," Stowers writes, "is by definition the penetration of a socially subordinate person by a socially superior person."¹⁰²

However, Stowers goes further than Brooten, who focuses almost exclusively on Paul's condemnation of female homoeroticism in Rom

1:26, by using his observations about sex and social status in order to analyze Paul's denunciation of male-male same-sex acts in Rom 1:27. According to Stowers, the ancients' conviction that sex must be defined in terms status means that embedded in all sexual relations is an act of mastery: for a man to penetrate a female, for example, means he has control over her. Conversely, Stowers argues, a man who allows himself to be penetrated as if he were a woman has improperly ceded his position as master, and the penetrator has also acted improperly in encouraging the other's unmanliness. Crucial here in Stowers's argument is his sense that an integral part of the Greco-Roman concern with a man's mastery over others was an "ethic of self-mastery," especially mastery over one's own desires, which Stowers proposes underlies Paul's rhetoric in Rom 1:27 (and, indeed, as Stowers sees it, Paul's rhetoric in all of Romans). What keeps a man a man in sexual relations, according to this ethic's logic, is his not "being overcome with passions in 'a woman-like way,'" or (paraphrasing Stowers's translation of Rom 1:27) his not allowing himself to be "burned up with ... appetite for ... another man."¹⁰³

In his article published on Rom 1:18–32 in 1995, Martin writes similarly to Stowers of the "radical difference between the logics of sexuality that underwrite Romans 1, on the one hand, and the modern logic, on the other,"¹⁰⁴ and states more generally, "the ancients had no conception of homosexual orientation in the modern sense ... they did not differentiate the different sexual activities into a bimorphic dichotomy framed by two different *kinds* of desire."¹⁰⁵ Rather, according to Martin, the ancients saw a desire for a same-sex partner, and especially "male *attraction* to beautiful males," as perfectly natural; what was unnatural, or beyond nature, however, was same-sex intercourse that sprung from an excess of this same-sex desire (as, in the ancients' minds, gluttony was an unnatural act that resulted from the excessive exercise of the perfectly natural desire to feed oneself). More specifically, according to Martin—who is very like both Brooten and Stowers in this regard—what is unnatural about same-sex intercourse in the ancient understanding is its "disruption of the male-female hierarchy," it being "contrary to nature" for a man to allow himself, as Martin quotes Plato as writing, "to be covered and mounted like cattle," that is, to be placed in the receptive or passive [female] position in male-male intercourse. Likewise, it would be "contrary to nature" for a woman to assume the insertive or active [male] position in female-female sexual congress.¹⁰⁶ As I have already suggested, I find Stowers's and Martin's analyses on these points compelling; Stephen D. Moore, professor of New Testament at Drew Theological Seminary, agrees, praising both what he describes as Stowers's "edifying" and "masterful" discussion (the pun fully intended on Moore's part) and

Martin's "superbly argued" exegesis, one that shows, in Moore's words, that the Rom 1:26–27 and modern understandings of sexuality "are so drastically different as to preclude any paraphrase of this incalculably influential passage that would assimilate it to the modern concept of homosexuality."¹⁰⁷

Deirdre J. Good, professor of New Testament at the General Theological Seminary in New York, similarly labels as "insightful" another of Martin's articles, on the translation of two terms found in 1 Cor 6:9, *malakos* and *arsenokoitēs*, which modern interpreters most typically assume refer to same-sex intercourse, or at least male same-sex intercourse. Good calls this article "insightful," moreover, particularly because of the constructionist position it promotes.¹⁰⁸ As Martin writes, his intent is to "challenge the objectivist notion that the Bible ... can provide contemporary Christians with a reliable *foundation* for ethical reflection" by pointing out, for example, how dramatically English translations and scholarly interpretations of the term *arsenokoitēs* changed in the mid-twentieth century, reflecting "the nineteenth century's invention of the category of the 'homosexual.'" In Martin's words:¹⁰⁹

Between the end of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century ... the translation of *arsenokoitēs* shifted from being the reference to an action that any man might well perform, regardless of orientation or disorientation, to refer to a "perversion," either an action or a propensity taken to be self-evidently abnormal or diseased. The shift in translation, that is, reflected the invention of the category of "homosexuality" as an abnormal orientation, an invention that occurred in the nineteenth century but gained popular currency only gradually in the twentieth ... the interpretations were prompted ... by shifts in modern sexual ideology.

The translation of *malakos* in English Bibles, as Martin demonstrates, also shifts quite dramatically in the mid-twentieth century, the earlier translation of "effeminate" being replaced by terms derived from the "modern medicalized categories of sexual, or particularly homosexual 'perversion.'" Our evidence from ancient sources, however, makes clear that "effeminate" is the much better translation, although Martin insists we must be clear that effeminacy in the ancient world was construed much differently than it is in ours:

A man could be condemned as effeminate for, among many other things, eating or drinking too much, enjoying gourmet cooking, wearing nice underwear or shoes, wearing much of anything on his head,

having long hair, shaving, caring for his skin, wearing cologne or aftershave, dancing too much, laughing too much, or gesticulating too much.

Sexually, “effeminacy was implicated in heterosexual sex as much as homosexual—or more so.” Modern translations that link the “effeminacy” of *malakos* to homosexuality are thus wrong and the result solely, Martin concludes, of our “shifts in sexual ideology.”¹¹⁰

Martin’s article documenting the culturally conditioned nature of our translations of *malakos* and *arsenokoitēs* appears in a volume of collected essays in which the final piece, by Jeffrey S. Siker, of the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University, effectively summarizes the constructionist position as we have surveyed it thus far. Siker writes:

It has become apparent that what we mean by the term “homosexuality” in the late twentieth century is for the most part rather different from what the biblical texts are discussing. Indeed, in order to prevent reading our own modern understandings of homosexuality anachronistically back into the biblical texts, I think we should stop talking about what the Bible has to say regarding “homosexuality.” ... Since the ancients did not have our notions of “heterosexual” and “homosexual” sexual orientations, to persist in using these terms when discussing “biblical sexual ethics” (yet another artificial construct) is misleading at best.

As he continues:¹¹¹

In our eagerness to apply the Bible to our contemporary questions about homosexuality, we often fail to see that what the Bible was talking about and what we are talking about are not just a little different but very different, to the point that I have come to conclude that the Bible offers almost no direct teaching about homosexuality as we understand it.

The New Testament scholar Herman C. Waetjen somewhat more pointedly states, “none of the texts in the Bible’s two testaments that deal with sexual deviance can or should be related to what today is being called ‘homosexuality.’”¹¹²

Still, despite Siker’s attempts to speak of the Bible as a whole, and despite Waetjen’s more specific insistence that the insights of social construction theory apply equally to “the Bible’s two testaments,” that is, to both the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament,

the fact is that, as in New Testament studies, social construction theory has been used less often than it might by Hebrew Bible scholars. In his article “The Bible and Homosexuality,” J. Glen Taylor, who teaches Hebrew Bible at Wycliffe College (the Toronto School of Theology) at the University of Toronto, initially seems an adherent of social constructionist methodology when he notes that “the term ‘homosexuality’ does not match well with the way in which the Bible itself addresses the issue.” But the reason Taylor then offers—“that homosexuality can refer to a condition or inclination apart from the acting-out of sexual relations, whereas the Bible does not recognize this distinction”—really misses the larger constructionist point that even the describing of a homosexual condition or inclination assumes a system of sexual categorization that is distinctive to our modern society. In addition, like Mauser and Hays in their exegeses of Rom 1:26–27, Taylor suggests a contrast between the Bible’s texts regarding “homosexual relations” and the biblical “affirmation” of heterosexual marriage, thus presuming, it seems, that heterosexuality and homosexuality existed in the same either/or relationship within the biblical world as they do within our own.¹¹³

More fully cognizant of the constructionist position, yet ultimately ambivalent, is the Finnish Hebrew Bible scholar Martti Nissinen in his 1998 book *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*. In his introductory chapter Nissinen describes for his readers the essentialist/constructionist debate and seems to evince a certain amount of sympathy for the constructionist position. He writes, for example, that “sexual preference ... must be examined in the larger framework of gender, body, and society” and similarly that “same-sex interaction cannot be simply equated with ‘homosexuality’ but must be viewed within the broader framework of gender identity, which in each culture and each individual involves different interpretations.” Even more explicitly, Nissinen notes that “all the sources examined in this study derive from the time ‘before sexuality,’ that is, before ‘sexuality’ and its derivatives were conceptualized through the *scientia sexualis* in the nineteenth century C.E.”;¹¹⁴ Nissinen’s footnote after this statement cites, moreover—seemingly with approval—the book that has been described as the locus classicus for the social constructionist program, volume 1 of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*,¹¹⁵ and also a volume of collected essays edited by Halperin and his fellow classicists and constructionists John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, whose title, *Before Sexuality*, is the source of Nissinen’s phraseology.

Yet, despite all this, Nissinen in the end seems unwilling to embrace the social constructionist claim that homosexuality and its heterosexual analog are categories of our modern world only. Rather, he writes, he does not hold “any particular brief for constructionism” and that people

would “have had identities before these were invented by modern scholars”¹¹⁶ More specifically, according to Nissinen, the nineteenth-century notion of “homosexuality” as a “class of people” sharing a medical anomaly “has its roots already in the Roman and Byzantine period.”¹¹⁷ He further states (citing—seemingly once more with approval—Brooten’s *Love Between Women* and the work of another critic of Halperin, Amy Richlin, on whom Brooten depends),¹¹⁸ “various individual sexual orientations would ... have existed among ancient people. Persons with such preferences do appear in ancient sources, and their existence was noted and commented upon by their contemporaries.”¹¹⁹

However, as Halperin has again shown, Nissinen’s analysis of the ancient authority he uses to illustrate these claims, the second-century CE physician Soranos, is flawed. According to Nissinen, Soranos “diagnosed the *mollis* and the *tribades*, men and women who habitually engaged in same-sex interaction, as mentally ill.”¹²⁰ On first reading, Halperin admits, this would “certainly seem to be nothing other than homosexuality as it is often understood today.” But what Nissinen fails to note is that elsewhere Soranos makes clear that what is “perverse” about the *molles* is not their habitual engagement in same-sex interactions per se but the “soft’ or unmasculine” role they wish to assume in these interactions, “depart[ing] from the cultural norm of manliness insofar as they actively desire to be subjected by other men to a ‘feminine’ (i.e., receptive) role in sexual intercourse.”¹²¹ Likewise, what is “perverse” about the *tribades*, women who have sex with other women, is not their participation in same-sex interactions but their pursuing of women “with an almost *masculine* jealousy.”¹²² The mental aberration manifest by the *malles* and the *tribades*, that is, is not their interest in same-sex partners but their sex-role reversal or gender deviance: the *malles* act deviantly by performing their culture’s standards of the feminine rather than the masculine; the *tribades* act deviantly by enacting their culture’s standards of the masculine versus the feminine. The conclusion that follows, completely counter to Nissinen’s understanding, is that this Soranos text more *sustains* than undermines a constructionist analysis.

So what of Hebrew Bible scholars who advocate more fully a social constructionist position? We can note first the interpretation that Saul M. Olyan, a professor of Hebrew Bible at Brown University, has offered of Lev 18:22 and 20:13, the two basically parallel Hebrew Bible texts that forbid a man to lie with another man “the lying down of a woman” (translation Olyan’s). As Olyan notes, multiple commentators both in the past and in our era (indeed, perhaps, a majority of commentators) have understood these texts as proscribing “homoerotic acts in general (frequently labeled ‘homosexuality’ by these scholars).”¹²³ Olyan,

however, recognizing that homosexuality and heterosexuality are “modern constructs,”¹²⁴ demonstrates not only that (as is often noted) the two Leviticus texts refer only to *male-male* homoerotic acts (as opposed to homoerotic acts in general, both male-male and female-female), but that “the lying down of a woman” in these Leviticus passages must be defined solely in relation to male-male *anal intercourse* (as opposed to other male-male homoerotic acts: oral sex and mutual masturbation, for example). Olyan further shows that the phrase “the lying down of a woman” must be understood generally in terms of receptivity and more specifically, given the context of the levitical passages, as the anal analog to the vaginal receptivity that characterizes the woman’s experience in male-female sexual intercourse. Yet while vaginal receptivity in male-female intercourse is viewed as normative from the levitical point of view, anal receptivity in male-male sexual interactions is not, because, as Olyan argues, “receptivity ... is *constructed* as appropriate exclusively to females” (emphasis mine).¹²⁵ According to Olyan, that is, ancient Israelite society had certain notions about gendered sex roles, and male-male anal intercourse is proscribed because, through one man’s having intercourse with another man as if this second man were a woman, it violates culturally conditioned notions about proper male and female sex roles.

This same insight—that the ancient Israelites considered receptivity in intercourse as culturally appropriate only for females—motivates Ken Stone in his exegesis of Judges 19, the story in which the Benjaminites of the town of Gibeah demand that an Ephraimite sojourning in their midst send out his Levite guest “so that we might know him,” that is, according to the biblical idiom, “so that we might have sexual intercourse with him” (Judg 19:22). Citing Foucault and Weeks (and, elsewhere, Halperin and Winkler), Stone proclaims his suspicions “about the relevance of modern Western beliefs about ‘sexual orientation’” and suggests instead that the threat of same-sex rape in the Judges 19 story needs to be understood according to a “rigid differentiation between male and female gender roles” and “the hierarchical nature of this differentiation.” More specifically, Stone argues that were the threatened rape to occur, the Levite would be forced into the “role of sexual object rather than sexual subject” (the receptive rather than the active partner). Consequently, according to the ancient Israelites’ gender logic, he would be “feminized” and thereby—given the hierarchically inferior position of women in the ancient Israelite worldview—placed in a position of social subordination and dishonor.¹²⁶ This is indeed a grievous insult, and its grievous nature becomes more evident still once we realize that, according to traditions of Near Eastern hospitality, it was *honor* that

was due to the Ephraimite's Levite guest and his entourage. What the men of Gibeah demand is thus a doubly atrocious proposition: both to deny the Levite the honor he is owed as a guest and to impose dishonor and humiliation on him instead. Stone has in addition argued that the insult constituted by the men of Gibeah's demand is "compounded within the narrative discourse by the fact that the message [demanding that the Levite come forth to be raped] is not conveyed directly to the Levite, but rather indirectly by means of the host." In this way, Stone suggests, "the Levite is ... not only an object of the intended action of the men of Gibeah, he is also an object of speech."¹²⁷

Stone then goes on to point out how several otherwise curious aspects of the Judges 19 story are illuminated by his interpretation. For example, the Ephraimite's offer to send his virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine out to the men of Gibeah instead of the male Levite for whom they have asked is well explained if the Ephraimite is understood as speaking out of a cultural ideology that presumes "better to hand over my daughter, who is at any rate a proper sexual object, than my Levite guest." And why is the Ephraimite's offer of his daughter and the concubine as substitutes for the Levite initially rejected, whereas the concubine is ultimately accepted by the men of Gibeah as an acceptable victim to rape? Because, Stone explains, "a sexual misconduct committed against a woman is, in one sense, an attack upon the man under whose authority she falls.... Thus, although the men of Gibeah did not bring dishonor upon the Levite directly by raping him *as if he were a woman*, they nevertheless manage to challenge his honor in another way: *through his woman*."¹²⁸

This explanation, that the Gibeahites' actions against the concubine are actually actions against the Levite's honor, in turn elucidates a third seemingly anomalous feature of the Judges story: why the Levite, when he brings a charge against the Gibeahites to the Israelite tribal council in the opening verses of Judges 20, speaks of Gibeah's offenses only in terms of himself, describing how *his* concubine was raped until she died and how *his* life was threatened. As Stone interprets this language of self-interest: "It is not her welfare that motivates his call for retaliation, but rather the damage that he believes has been done to his own honor." And what of the fact that the Levite's charge that his life was threatened is not really true? Stone suggests that, again, the cultural ideology of gender subordination may help us make sense of the Levite's claim: that the Levite, when he is threatened with being feminized through rape, becomes identified with his concubine, the woman who actually was raped. Thus, like his concubine, he is also threatened with death, at least implicitly.¹²⁹ Alternatively, I might suggest that, within the ancient Israelite cultural

understanding Stone has described, even the possibility of being made a feminized object through the act of homosexual rape is so dishonoring that the Levite refuses to admit to Israel's tribal assembly he faced such potential humiliation. Rather, he presents to his fellow Israelites the false but more comfortable accusation that the Gibeahites threatened to take his life.

Yet, whatever specific interpretation one prefers regarding this last point, it seems clear that Stone's overall exegesis compellingly explains parts of Judges 19–20 that have heretofore appeared to be interpretive cruxes. Phyllis A. Bird of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary has recognized, moreover, that the same understanding of ancient Israelite gender and sexual ideologies that Stone advances with regard to Judges 19–20 can help explain the kindred story of Sodom and Gomorrah found in Gen 19:1–29. In this tale Abraham's nephew Lot, while sojourning in the town of Sodom, refuses to give over the two men lodging with him (who unbeknownst to Lot are messengers of God) when the men of Sodom demand that Lot "send them out so that we might know them" (Gen 19:5). That is, as in the Judges 19 story, the men of Sodom demand that Lot's visitors be sent out so that they might have sex with them, and sex in which the visitors are to be made the receptive partners in anal intercourse. As Bird writes, the text's underlying premise here is "a distinction of active and passive partners ... seen to be fundamental and universal, and ... the passive role is always defined as feminine. Hence involvement in homosexual acts in the passive role involves a threat to male identity." Indeed, as I have already noted, to subject a man to this sort of humiliation is, in the ancient Israelite understanding of sex and gender roles, among the most egregious of insults. Furthermore, as in the Judges 19 story, the insult here is compounded through the denying to Lot's visitors the honor that the standards of Near Eastern hospitality insist is their due as guests (we can especially see this by comparing the honor Abraham accords these same visitors when they come to him in Gen 18:1–8: he gives them water for washing, food, and a place to sit in the shade during the heat of the day). In fact, so outrageous are the Sodomites' demands with regard to Lot's visitors, according to the logic of Gen 19:1–11, that even the *suggestion* that the men of Sodom might dishonor rather than honor Lot's guests seals the city's fate, and thus, despite the fact that no sexual violation actually occurs, the destruction God had threatened to bring upon Sodom is still carried out.

Bird further points out how the Sodom narrative's descriptions of Lot's actions once the Sodomites voice their demand make even clearer just how serious an affront their proposition is according to ancient Israel's sexual worldview, as Lot, somewhat similarly to the

Ephraimite host in Judges 19, offers to let the men of Sodom rape his virgin daughters instead of giving his two male visitors over to them. To be sure, Bird notes, the loss of these daughters' sexual honor through rape would be a shameful thing according to ancient Israel's sexual mores (we can compare Gen 34:7 and 31, where the rape of Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, is considered an outrage by her brothers). Moreover, dishonor would also accrue to Lot were his virgin daughters to be raped, since he as a father is charged with protecting his daughters' sexual chastity until they marry. Nevertheless, from the narrative's point of view, Lot's offer to send forth his daughters to the men of Sodom to be raped is still deemed the right thing to do, as even the potential threats to Lot's honor and to the honor of his daughters are not as grievous an insult in Israelite thought as is the dishonoring that would be suffered were Lot's male guests to be treated as women during an act of male-male anal intercourse. A raped woman at least remains within the gender role of receptive female deemed proper in the ancient Israelite understanding, whereas a man who assumes, or is forced to assume, the role of passive partner in an act of male-male intercourse does not. The insult is therefore significantly greater. As Bird states, "male honor ... is valued even above a daughter's virginity."¹³⁰

Bird, like Olyan, also describes issues of "gender identity and roles" as underlying the prohibitions of Lev 18:22 and 20:13,¹³¹ and Daniel Boyarin, Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture in the Departments of Near Eastern Studies and Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, more globally states, "The element common to both classical culture (with all of its variations) and biblical culture (with all its variations) is that the taboos and tolerances vis-à-vis same-sex genital practice were tied precisely to structures of maleness and femaleness, to gender and not a putative sexuality."¹³² Elsewhere, Boyarin more explicitly denies that the Bible "knows ... of that entity called by us 'sexuality,'"¹³³ a statement reminiscent of Bird's summary estimation: "sexuality as we understand it today is not addressed in the Bible. It is a modern concept."¹³⁴ Like Olyan and Stone, that is, Boyarin and Bird recommend a social constructionist analysis, the evidence for which Boyarin describes as "compelling."¹³⁵

As I have indicated above, this is an assessment that I share, believing that the many descriptions of constructionist scholars' work I have provided demonstrate well the merits of applying a social constructionist analysis to the biblical tradition and that constructionism's methodological premises should therefore guide all our examinations of ancient Near Eastern erotic and sexual interactions, whether these interactions be opposite-sex or same-sex. I began this chapter with an "on the one hand" statement about the

David and Jonathan greeting card I had been sent by my former student: that, on the one hand, I was sympathetic to the card's message because I am committed to its overarching gay rights agenda. But, as I conclude this discussion, I hope my feelings on the other hand have become clear: that the easy correlation the card posits between the biblical world and ours, and more specifically between the "intense love" of David and Jonathan and "gay men ... within the Judaeo-Christian tradition today," is misguided. Likewise, the relatively easy correlation many biblical scholars seem to posit between homosexuality as it exists in our world and the biblical texts that describe, or may allude to, same-sex erotic or sexual interactions is a mistake. Indeed, my greeting card may have seemed at first glance the proverbial straw man and thus not worth the time I have spent here in extended critique. But because it represents the presumptions most researchers actually hold concerning a basic continuity between the biblical world and ours, I believe that unmasking and dethroning its fundamental presuppositions is crucial in order that these presuppositions be replaced with an understanding that all erotic and sexual interactions in the biblical and ancient Near Eastern world need to be analyzed on that world's terms.

This sort of analysis is one of my primary goals in the examinations I undertake in this volume, of the homoeroticized language and imagery that are used to describe the heroic relationships of the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh and his counterpart Enkidu and the biblical David and his comrade Jonathan. Let me now turn, therefore, to begin my investigation, focusing in the first half of this study on the great Mesopotamian story of heroic companionship, the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh



INTRODUCING GILGAMESH



Any attempt to describe the magnificent collection of literary works that has come down to us from ancient Mesopotamia almost inevitably becomes an attempt to describe an embarrassment of riches. The Mesopotamians have given us a myriad of superb mythological compositions, such as the creation story called the Enuma Elish and several different precursors to the biblical story of the flood. They have given us a corpus of the world's oldest legal codes, including, most famously, the Code of Hammurapi, dating from ca. 1750 BCE and thus predecessor to the law codes that the Bible attributes to Moses by at least five hundred years (and almost certainly, according to modern biblical scholars, by several centuries more). The ancient Mesopotamians have also bequeathed to us numerous hymns, prayers, lamentations, ballads, and love songs, as well as collections of precepts and proverbs, accounts of oracles and prophecies, catalogs of omens, texts of magical incantations, historiographic narratives, treaty records, and royal, building, and other types of inscriptions. But arguably more notable than any one of these compositions, and perhaps more notable than all of them put together, is the Epic of Gilgamesh, which is considered by many to be the greatest literary masterpiece known to us from ancient Mesopotamian civilization and, moreover, one of the greatest masterpieces of all of world literature.¹

The Epic's origins are ancient indeed, probably belonging to the oldest period of Mesopotamian history, an era scholars call the Early Dynastic, which lasted from ca. 2900 to 2350 BCE. During this time a people known as the Sumerians thrived in what is today southern Iraq, living in some thirty or so independent city-states under priest-king rulers called *ensis*.² But the Gilgamesh Epic really began to come into flower only in the early second millennium BCE, after Mesopotamia's Sumerian rulers were supplanted by Semitic-speaking Akkadians, who immigrated into Sumer from the north. These Akkadians determinedly asserted their political hegemony over the Sumerians, yet at the same time readily absorbed and even elaborated upon earlier Sumerian cultural traditions, including many of the Sumerian cultural traditions

about Gilgamesh. By the middle of the first millennium BCE, some one thousand years or so later, the Akkadians' reworking of these older Gilgamesh traditions was complete, and we can speak of what we know today as the Epic of Gilgamesh, a long and integrated piece of narrative poetry consisting of about three thousand lines, which Mesopotamian scribes recorded on twelve clay tablets using cuneiform script.

The Epic's main characters are Gilgamesh, a mighty hero and also king, and the equally mighty Enkidu, specially created by the gods, according to the text, to be Gilgamesh's comrade in adventure and, more important, his bosom friend. The poem's action takes place in many different settings, initially, Gilgamesh's royal fief, the Mesopotamian city-state of Uruk, known to readers of the Bible as Erech (Gen 10:10) and to moderns as the southern Iraqi city of Warka. But as the story proceeds, Gilgamesh and Enkidu go forth from Uruk to the Cedar Forest, faraway in the west, to slay the ferocious monster who guards that domain, Humbaba (in earlier tradition, Huwawa).³ After the two heroes return to Uruk and triumph there over another ferocious monster, the Bull of Heaven, Gilgamesh goes out from the city again to undertake another lengthy journey, one that takes him east through long stretches of the wilderness until he reaches the very ends of the earth.

Yet while the journey to the Cedar Forest was embarked upon in a spirit of adventure, this second journey is marked by a spirit of despair, as between the two journeys, just subsequent to the victory over the Bull of Heaven, Gilgamesh's beloved Enkidu has died. It is his grief over this loss that in part drives Gilgamesh's second journey, but even more so he is driven by his fears that he too will die. His goal in his travels is thus to seek out Utnapishtim, the hero of the Mesopotamian story of the flood, who as a result of surviving the great deluge was granted immortality by the gods. Gilgamesh's aim is to achieve that same immortality for himself.

It is in this part of the Epic that the poem displays its greatest genius, as it chronicles with almost unbearable pathos Gilgamesh's despondency over Enkidu's demise, his near desperate attempts to stave off his own death, and the heartbreaking understanding to which the hero finally must come regarding his mortality. One of the most famous interpreters of the Gilgamesh Epic, Thorkild Jacobsen, has called the tale a story about "growing up," arguing that Gilgamesh by the end of the Epic is one who has left behind the naive sensibilities of a child in order to achieve the maturity of an adult.⁴ There is much that can be said in favor of this understanding:⁵ Gilgamesh, for example, is twice described in the Epic as "young" (*ṣeḫēru*; Tablet II, line 251, Tablet V, line 128); he is once said to count himself among the *etlū*, or

“young men” of Uruk (Tablet VI, lines 176 and 178); and during their interactions, Utnapishtim also speaks of him at one point as an *etlu*, or a “young man” (Tablet XI, line 211).⁶ Certainly, moreover, one of the primary lessons of life that the young need to learn is the same lesson Gilgamesh must apprehend: the fact of his own mortality and, more generally, an acceptance of human limitations.⁷

Still, the longer I have lived, and especially the longer I have spent teaching young adults and listening to them speak with almost unabashed optimism about their aspirations and life ambitions, the more I have come to think that the Epic of Gilgamesh is not so much a story about growing up as it is one about growing old.⁸ The story, it increasingly seems to me, is about reaching the sort of resigned understanding that comes only after being beaten down by decades of life, the resigned understanding that, even for those of us who lead the most privileged of existences, all of the promises that life seemed to hold when we first went forth to make our way in the world can never be realized and that we, like Gilgamesh, are doomed to end up with considerably less than we had expected and for which we had hoped. Much of the Gilgamesh story is told using imagery that is rooted in and distinctive to a Mesopotamian worldview, including the images of sex and gender on which I will focus in the chapters that follow. But what makes the Epic of Gilgamesh a masterpiece is its ability to speak across the ages and across the globe to each of us as we attempt to make peace with the knowledge that we can have only a fraction of that which, in our youth, life had seemed to offer and which, in our youthful insouciance, we had childishly assumed we could achieve. This is the “tragedy,” as the distinguished Assyriologist Wilfried G. Lambert writes, that renders the Gilgamesh Epic “still moving for any human heart.”⁹

The Historical Gilgamesh and the History of the Gilgamesh Epic

As I have just suggested, Gilgamesh’s significance for us today lies in his role as a literary character whose tale of hope and despair reaches across the cultural divide that separates us from the ancient Mesopotamians in order to address some of the fundamental questions of human existence that all of us face. There does seem, however, to have been a historical Gilgamesh, although our evidence is admittedly somewhat circumstantial.¹⁰ The so-called Sumerian King List, which dates from the early second millennium BCE (ca. 2000–1700 BCE) and claims to catalog all the kings who had ruled over the

Sumerians since the beginning of time (“when kingship was lowered from heaven”), lists Gilgamesh (or, as he would have been called in Sumerian tradition, Bilgames) as the fifth king of the first dynasty of the Sumerian city-state of Uruk.¹¹ This would place Gilgamesh’s rule some time during the second phase of the Early Dynastic era (ED II) of Sumerian history, which lasted from ca. 2700–2500 BCE. Unfortunately, there are no historical texts confirming the existence of a King Gilgamesh of Uruk that date from this ED II period, although we do have an Early Dynastic votive inscription that bears the name of a King Enmebaragesi of the city-state of Kish. This same King Enmebaragesi is also referred to in later Sumerian texts in conjunction with Gilgamesh: in a late third-millennium BCE hymn composed in praise of Gilgamesh, for example, and in an epic text, probably of about the same date, that tells the story of a battle between Gilgamesh and Enmebaragesi’s son and successor Agga (or Akka).¹² Most scholars suppose that since the King Enmebaragesi of these late third millennium BCE hymns and epics is a known historical figure, so too must be his hymnic and epic counterpart Gilgamesh.

The existence, though, of hymnic and epic texts celebrating Gilgamesh that date from the late third millennium BCE suggests that very early on in the course of Sumerian tradition Gilgamesh began to be transformed from a character of history into a character of legend and even of myth. Indeed, already by ca. 2500 BCE Gilgamesh’s name shows up on a list of the gods of the Sumerian pantheon, along with the name of his father, Lugalbanda. Temple records from ca. 2500–2100 BCE similarly indicate that, as a god, Gilgamesh received cult offerings. By ca. 2050 BCE Gilgamesh was so firmly enshrined in the Sumerian pantheon that Shulgi (ca. 2094–2047 BCE), the second king of the third dynasty of the city-state of Ur (which had its origins in Gilgamesh’s city-state of Uruk), claimed Gilgamesh, along with the other gods of Uruk, among his royal ancestors. Many scholars suggest, moreover, that it is at this time, and on account of the interest of Shulgi and other Ur III kings, that Sumerian epic accounts about Gilgamesh were first composed or at least first rendered in their present form. These include the previously mentioned tale of “Gilgamesh and Agga (Akka)” and four other Sumerian texts: 1. “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” (also known as “Gilgamesh and the Cedar Forest” and as “Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living”), which describes the journey Gilgamesh and Enkidu made to the faraway Cedar Forest in order to kill the mythological monster Huwawa (later Humbaba); 2. “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven,” which tells of the confrontation between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and the equally monstrous Bull of Heaven; 3. “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld” (also known as “Gilgamesh and the Netherworld”), which

recounts a tale of Enkidu's descent into the netherworld; and 4. "The Death of Gilgamesh," which relates the story of Gilgamesh's eventual death.¹³

It was not, however, until the subsequent Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1600 BCE) that some of these originally unconnected Sumerian epic texts—now rendered in the Akkadian language of the Sumerians' Semitic supplanters—began to be brought together to form a larger literary composition.¹⁴ At this point also other tales accrued to this complex, most famously, perhaps, some elements from the Sumero-Akkadian story of the flood.¹⁵ During this process of compilation, the corpora were adapted and reshaped, sometimes substantially.¹⁶ Important new materials, especially regarding Enkidu's origins and the beginnings of his relationship with Gilgamesh, were added. Ultimately, all these components were integrated into a literary whole, "with a unified theme and meaningful plot."¹⁷ It is this Old Babylonian period compilation that we can begin to describe as the Gilgamesh Epic.

By the second half of the Old Babylonian period, the form of the Old Babylonian version of the Epic was, as far as we can tell, generally fixed.¹⁸ Unfortunately, archaeologists have not (yet) recovered the complete text of this Old Babylonian account, but scholars have found tablets that relate several of its major episodes: 1. the initial meeting of Gilgamesh and Enkidu;¹⁹ 2. the journey to the Cedar Forest and the struggle against Huwawa (later Humbaba);²⁰ and 3. the encounters Gilgamesh has during his wilderness wanderings with the sun god Shamash, with an alewife named Siduri, who lives on the shores of a sea that has in its midst the ominous "waters of death," and in addition with a ferryman named Sursunabu (later Urshanabi), who is to take Gilgamesh across this sea and these waters of death to the home of the flood hero Utnapishtim.²¹ When taken together these Old Babylonian texts "parallel or refer to the contents of most of the tablets of the late [that is, the first-millennium BCE] version,"²² focusing on Enkidu's origins, his role as Gilgamesh's bosom friend and even second self, Enkidu's eventual death and how deeply it affected Gilgamesh, and the despairing journey to the dwelling place of the immortal Utnapishtim that Gilgamesh undertook in response.²³

As I have already intimated, however, this Old Babylonian version, although it contained most of the content found in the first-millennium BCE form of the Epic, continued to develop through the next one thousand years, through the Middle Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian periods (ca. 1600–1000 BCE and ca. 1000–400 BCE, respectively), eventually giving rise to what is commonly referred to as the Epic's Late or Standard version. Archaeologists first discovered the text of this Standard version in the nineteenth century among the remains of a great library that was assembled in his capital city of Nineveh by King

Ashurbanipal of Assyria (the northern region of Mesopotamia), who ruled from ca. 669–627 BCE. Other copies of this first-millennium BCE text were subsequently found in the earlier Assyrian capital cities of Assur and Calah (biblical Nimrud); in the city of Sultantepe, in the far north of Mesopotamia; and in the cities of Babylon and Uruk, in the south.

Yet while widespread in their distribution, all these copies seem standardized in terms of their overall structure and content, and even standardized in terms of the wording of individual lines; hence their designation as the Epic's Standard version. This Standard version, however, "although its basic form [and] plot" and key aspects of its message (most notably its stress on the futility of Gilgamesh's search for eternal life) "do not differ from those of the Old Babylonian version," does display "considerable divergence" from the Old Babylonian in that "lines are reworked in degrees varying from negligible to complete ... entire sections or episodes are restructured ... certain theological changes occur."²⁴ Also, three major sections are added: 1. a hymnic prologue that praises Gilgamesh for the great knowledge he had acquired during the course of his journeys, 2. a much lengthier set of materials concerning the story of the flood, and 3. the older Sumerian tale of Enkidu's descent to the netherworld. It is generally presumed that this transition took place during the Middle Babylonian period.²⁵ It is most commonly attributed to one Sîn-leqi-unninnī, described in Mesopotamian tradition as an exorcist-priest who was a contemporary of Gilgamesh's but who is assumed by scholars to have lived in Uruk at least a thousand years later than Gilgamesh allegedly lived and to have produced "some important Middle Babylonian Version or ... the late version ... some time in the last half or quarter of the second millennium."²⁶ I have already briefly summarized this Late or Standard version above, but because the analysis I will offer in subsequent chapters depends so heavily on a close reading of both the Standard and the Old Babylonian accounts, let me now turn to describe these narratives—and at least some of the difference between them—in more detail.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

The twenty-six lines of the hymnic prologue that opens the Epic's Standard version are proleptic, written from the perspective of a Gilgamesh who has already "seen everything" (Tablet I, line 1), a Gilgamesh, that is, who has already made his "distant journey" to the dwelling place of Utnapishtim (Tablet I, line 7) and has brought back a great secret, "a tale of the time before the flood" (Tablet I, line 6).

Moreover, the prologue claims, Gilgamesh, upon his return, wrote down the story of his adventures—"on stone chiseled each wearying toil" (Tablet I, line 8)²⁷—and, as the prologue continues, we, the prologue's audience, are exhorted to seek out the king's inscribed tablet and read it (Tablet I, lines 22–26). As William L. Moran explains, the poet's point here is twofold: first, to demonstrate the authenticity of the text that follows by suggesting that its source was the autobiographical narrative authored by Gilgamesh himself; second, to instruct us as readers to partake of the Epic in a certain way, one that furthers our own knowledge by "learning what the life of Gilgamesh has to teach us."²⁸

The Standard version then begins to tell the story of the Epic proper, using material it basically takes over without considerable thematic change from the Old Babylonian account. This includes, somewhat paradoxically, material it takes over without considerable thematic change from the Old Babylonian account's introductory lines, which, differing from the Standard version, laud Gilgamesh not for his superior knowledge but as one who is "the greatest among kings" (Tablet I, line 27) because he, who is described as being two-thirds divine and one-third human, surpasses all other rulers in heroic stature, in bravery, and in strength. In fact, in the Standard version, as apparently in the Old Babylonian, Gilgamesh is initially portrayed as a hero who seems not to know his own strength, so that his relentless energy and vigor, and the excessive demands that this energy and vigor fuel, come to bear oppressively upon his own people: "he does not leave a son to his father," we are told, nor "a girl to [her mother]" (Tablet I, lines 57, 62, 69, and 74).²⁹ The people thus pray to the gods for respite, and the gods respond by having the birth goddess, Aruru, create Enkidu, a creature of comparable strength and energy who can occupy Gilgamesh's attentions.

These two heroic characters, however, do not immediately meet, as the Enkidu created by the gods is a wild man of the steppe, an exemplar, as Mesopotamian tradition would have it, of humanity in its originally savage and primal state.³⁰ This primitive and uncivilized Enkidu's body is covered with shaggy hair, like an animal's, and the tresses on his head are long, "like a woman's." He eats wild grasses "alongside the gazelles," and he jostles with the other animals as they drink at their watering holes (Tablet I, lines 88–95). He abets his animal companions, moreover, by filling in a local hunter's pit traps and pulling out the snares this trapper has set. Desperate to defend his livelihood against Enkidu's provocations, the huntsman, as advised by his father, goes to Uruk to ask Gilgamesh to send a prostitute from the city who might accompany him back into the wilderness and seduce Enkidu. Gilgamesh agrees, the plan is put into action, and it works

perfectly. Upon seeing the prostitute, whose name is Shamhat,³¹ Enkidu is indeed seduced, and six days and seven nights of ardent and uninterrupted lovemaking follow. Immediately thereafter, Enkidu's animal nature leaves him ("Enkidu was diminished, he could not run as before"; Tablet I, line 184), and the transformation that makes him human begins ("he had grown in broad understanding"; Tablet I, line 185).

This process of humanization continues as Shamhat leads Enkidu to join the hunters' camp (although the Standard version becomes fragmentary at this point, and we are reliant on the Old Babylonian to fill in the gaps). Assuming, though, that the Standard version followed its Old Babylonian prototype, the story recounts how Enkidu anoints himself with oil, dons clothes, and learns to eat the food of humans—according to Mesopotamian custom, bread and beer. During this time, as described in a portion of the Standard version that is extant, he also learns from Shamhat some things about Gilgamesh, most notably, that Gilgamesh has had two dreams, one of a meteor and the second of an axe, that presage Enkidu's coming (these dreams are recounted as well in the Old Babylonian, although in a somewhat different context). Enkidu learns even more about Gilgamesh according to a passage we again know only from the Old Babylonian, when he hears from a passing stranger that a marriage is about to take place in Uruk in which, it seems, Gilgamesh is to bed the bride before her husband is allowed to do so.³² Outraged, apparently, by this idea (because it violates the standards of human community that Enkidu, with the zeal of a convert, has recently come to embrace?), Enkidu goes off to Uruk to confront Gilgamesh and stop him. Yet despite the fact that, according to a passage preserved for us in both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions, the two initially encounter one another as combatants, the wrestling match in which they engage ends, according to the better-preserved Old Babylonian (at what would be about midway through the Standard version's Tablet II), with them as fast friends, the bride's marriage bed forgotten as they become completely absorbed in their interactions with one another.

Soon, in fact, these two restlessly energetic souls are off on the first of their great adventures together, the confrontation with the monstrous Huwawa/Humbaba in the Cedar Forest. Again, the Standard version, which tells the tale in its Tablets III, IV, and V, follows basically the account found in the Old Babylonian, although Gilgamesh's motivation for undertaking the journey is different in the two editions and the role of the sun god Shamash is changed.³³ Nevertheless, the outcome is certainly the same: Huwawa/Humbaba is killed, Gilgamesh and Enkidu fell many of the forest's great cedars, including one with which they plan to make a door for the temple of the

god Enlil in his cult city of Nippur. Next, according to an episode in Tablet VI of the Standard version for which there are no Old Babylonian parallels (and which may not have been a part of the Old Babylonian version at all),³⁴ Gilgamesh, having returned to Uruk triumphant after the battle and having reclothed himself in his resplendent royal robes, attracts the attention of the Mesopotamian goddess of sex and love, Ishtar. Smitten, she extends to him an offer of marriage. Gilgamesh, however, rejects her, and in scathing terms, rehearsing at length a list of others to whom she has similarly proffered her affections and then betrayed. Ishtar, insulted and enraged, storms off to see her father, the sky god Anu, who eventually is persuaded to release to his daughter the vicious Bull of Heaven so that this animal might kill Gilgamesh and give the goddess her revenge. But Enkidu and Gilgamesh, working in tandem, are able to kill the Bull instead, and as Ishtar looks on from atop Uruk's city walls, Enkidu hurls the haunch of the Bull at her, literally throwing in her face the evidence that he and Gilgamesh have gotten the better of her.

But, from the gods' point of view, all of this—the killing of Huwawa/Humbaba and the slaying of the Bull of Heaven—is too much, hubris that oversteps Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's proper place in the cosmic order. The heroes must therefore be punished, and as Tablet VII of the Standard version begins, Enkidu tells Gilgamesh of an ominous dream he has had that reveals the decision reached by the gods' divine council: that one of the two—ultimately decreed to be Enkidu—must die. Shortly thereafter Enkidu becomes ill and, after twelve days, he succumbs. Gilgamesh is devastated by the loss of his friend, but, more important in terms of the story the Epic seeks to tell, he is devastated by the realization that despite the fact that he is two-thirds divine, he too could someday die. Determined to avoid this fate, he abandons Uruk at the beginning of the Standard version's Tablet IX in order to journey across a vast wilderness to the ends of the world, there to learn the secrets of eternal life known to one of the denizens of that region, the flood hero Utnapishtim, the only human ever to have been granted immortality by the gods.³⁵

The story of the journey to Utnapishtim's is again preserved both in the Standard version and (partially) in the Old Babylonian, although the Standard version (as is often the case) is more homogenized and repetitive than the Old Babylonian, with Gilgamesh in Tablet X giving basically the same speech about his grief to each of the three characters he encounters at the world's edge, the alewife Siduri, Utnapishtim's ferryman Urshanabi (earlier Sursunabu), and Utnapishtim himself.³⁶ The Standard version, as I have already noted, also adds to the Old Babylonian Epic a much more extensive set of materials relating to the story of the flood, in particular a long (188-line)

recitation of the actual flood story, narrated in Tablet XI by Utnapishtim. Yet, despite these differences, the point the two versions seek to make is surely once more the same: that the immortality the gods granted to Utnapishtim on account of his surviving the great flood will not be granted to Gilgamesh. Nor is Gilgamesh able to gain immortality through the alternate means Utnapishtim offers him: by staying awake for six days and seven nights. Instead Gilgamesh falls asleep immediately and does not awaken until this weeklong trial is over. Moreover, according to at least the Standard version (the Old Babylonian version seems to have ended shortly after Gilgamesh wakes up from his six-day sleep),³⁷ Gilgamesh fails at one final chance to claim some sort of eternal life, which is to secure and eat a magical “Plant of Rejuvenation.”³⁸ At this point, according to the Standard version, Gilgamesh finally gives up on his quest to gain immortality and returns to Uruk.

But although Gilgamesh returns to Uruk in some sense despondent, the story of his homecoming in the Standard version is not meant to be bleak.³⁹ Rather, on his arrival in Uruk at the end of Tablet XI, Gilgamesh urges the ferryman Urshanabi, who has brought him home, to walk the walls of the city and admire their workmanship, exhorting him using language that repeats lines uttered in praise of the walls in the Standard version’s prologue. The point of this repetition is to bring us back to the theme of knowledge that the Standard version’s prologue introduced: what Gilgamesh has learned from his journey is that, rather than strive for things that are beyond human means, the goal to which he should properly aspire is to live as fully as he can within the confines of humanity’s limitations. More specifically, he should give up his quest to escape death and aspire instead to create the greatest monuments of human civilization that he as king is able—walls, and, the prologue adds, temples and great works of literature—for it is through these creations, rather than through any grant of eternal life, the Standard version suggests, that Gilgamesh can gain some form of immortality. In my comments at the beginning of this chapter, I called the Epic of Gilgamesh a tragedy, and I believe it is, tragic in its conviction that there are nearly unbearable losses and failures that Gilgamesh, like all humans, must learn to endure.⁴⁰ Yet however bitter these lessons are—and the Standard version insists they are bitter indeed—the Epic still maintains that life is bittersweet, for even in the midst of loss and failure there are measures of comfort and contentment. To be sure, these measures are less—far less—than that for which Gilgamesh, and by extension all humans, had hoped, but they are something. While the Epic of Gilgamesh could never be described as having a happy ending, it does offer a degree of solace, and thus Gilgamesh, although beaten down and weary, is nevertheless

by the end of his story said to be “at peace” (*pašāḥu*; Tablet I, line 7).⁴¹

Curiously, though, the Standard version, after constructing this rather adroit literary framework that both brings the Epic back to its beginnings and offers at least some resolution to the dilemmas it has raised, does not conclude, but adds a twelfth tablet, a practically verbatim translation of part of the older Sumerian tale of Enkidu's descent to the netherworld (“Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld”). Why this story is included in the Standard version is unclear, and most scholars dismiss it as “an inorganic appendage to the eleven tablets which constituted the original form of the late version.”⁴² As just suggested, its presence destroys the literary framework effected by the lines Gilgamesh utters in praise of Uruk's walls at the end of Tablet XI, and the Tablet XII story also contradicts the story of Tablets I–XI in several fundamental ways. Most notably perhaps, when Tablet XII opens Enkidu is still alive! Additionally, in Tablet XII (line 54), Enkidu is at least once called Gilgamesh's “servant” or “slave” (*ARAD*, which in logographic writing—that is, writing in which cuneiform signs stand for full words—denotes *ardu*, “slave” or “servant”), and Gilgamesh is at least once called Enkidu's “master” (*bēlu*; line 7).⁴³ This language is the typical way of describing Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship in the various Sumerian tales about Gilgamesh: as Moran writes, in Sumerian tradition, as in lines 7 and 54 of Tablet XII, Enkidu is to Gilgamesh “the conventional courtier.”⁴⁴ But this characterization is otherwise wholly alien to both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions, each of which resolutely replaces the Sumerian language of master and servant with language of comradeship and collegiality.

Indeed, this recasting of the nature of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship is one of the major innovations of the Akkadian Epic.⁴⁵ From the tradition's point of view, this innovation is introduced in order to promote the Epic's larger thematic concern regarding Gilgamesh's desperate quest for eternal life and its futility, for it is only a loss as great as the loss of Enkidu, his second self, that can arouse in Gilgamesh such irremediable fears about his own death and send him on his vainglorious journey to escape it. As Jacobsen writes, “To bring home to Gilgamesh the full horror of death the author needed the death of someone very near to him and deeply beloved by him. Into that rôle he cast Enkidu, which meant a complete recasting of Enkidu's traditional [Sumerian] image.”⁴⁶ Jeffrey H. Tigay concurs:⁴⁷

To enable Enkidu's death to turn Gilgamesh ... to a literal quest for immortality, the Akkadian author seized upon the sporadic hints of friendship in the Sumerian tales and applied them across the board.... The literary changes which give the Akkadian epic its distinctive

features were set in motion by the author's raising the status on Enkidu from servant to friend.

Yet while this transformation of the nature of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship was, for the Akkadian tradition, only a means toward an end, a way of enabling the Epic to address its larger thematic interests regarding humanity's coming to terms with its own mortality, for me, in undertaking an examination of the interactions of the hero Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu, the Akkadian Epic's reconceptualization of the relationship between these two characters is the primary concern. More specifically, I am interested in just exactly how this reconceptualized relationship is described. As I will explore in detail in the following chapter, at many points the relationship is depicted using language that is highly eroticized and even sexual. Early on in the Epic, for example, Gilgamesh imagines himself "loving" Enkidu "like a wife," and he is elsewhere said to act toward Enkidu as if Enkidu were a "bride." Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu, moreover, once they encounter one another, are depicted as abandoning the women who had theretofore been the objects of their sexual interests in order to focus their attentions solely on each other, and never again in the Epic is either portrayed as having sexual congress with a member of the opposite sex. Indeed, Gilgamesh scathingly rejects the goddess Ishtar's proposal of marriage. For some, all this imagery, and more, suggests that we understand Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Epic as homosexual lovers who enjoy an intimate and exclusive sexual relationship. Others, however, object to such an interpretation. Such scholars argue, first, that the data their colleagues put forward in support of their homosexual interpretation are not as conclusive as has been claimed. But, even more important, some of these critics raise significant questions regarding the ways in which same-sex erotic and sexual interactions were conceived of in ancient Mesopotamia and the degree to which the descriptions of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship correspond to these Mesopotamian conceptualizations. Yet even these latter interpreters almost unanimously agree with the proponents of the former theory that, whether sexual or not, the language and imagery used to depict Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship have to be understood as highly erotic in nature.

It is this last point that seems to me the most salient. As I will suggest more thoroughly in the chapters that follow, to formulate the debate regarding the nature of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship in terms of a question of "were they or weren't they" quickly falls into the trap about which I warned in [chapter 1](#): to assume that the categories of heterosexual and homosexual that we use today can be used to discuss opposite-sex and same-sex erotic and sexual

interactions in the ancient Mesopotamian world. It further seems to me that framing the debate according to the “were they or weren’t they” question comes perilously close to treating the Gilgamesh text as if the interactions between Gilgamesh and Enkidu actually happened, rather than understanding that, whatever we might say about Gilgamesh’s historicity, Gilgamesh and Enkidu as we have them are literary characters whose relationship exists only within the framework of an epic poem. What I thus propose to do in the discussion that follows is, first, in [chapter 3](#), to outline more completely the evidence that speaks to the eroticized and sexualized nature of Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s relationship and to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the analyses of this relationship that have been advanced in the past. Then, in [chapter 4](#), I will present a way of understanding the text’s homoeroticized language that I believe both avoids the trap of speaking of same-sex eroticism in the ancient Mesopotamian world as if the Mesopotamian worldview were analogous to our own and also takes seriously the Gilgamesh story as a piece of epic literature.

I should note briefly in this regard that, despite its failure to fit within the literary framework of the Standard version, I will be making occasional reference in my comments to Tablet XII. This is because the Akkadian translation of this tablet, even though it otherwise adheres almost slavishly to its Sumerian prototype, does deviate at points with respect to my primary interest here, meaning it can depict Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s relationship as one between closely bonded and loving companions rather than, as in the Sumerian, a relationship between a master and his servant. Thus, while the older Sumerian designations of “master” and “servant” are retained in lines 7 and 54 of Tablet XII, as I noted above, they are more typically changed. For example, in lines 6, 80, and 84 of the text’s Akkadian recension, the epithet of “servant” that is used of Enkidu in the Sumerian is dropped. The Akkadian “also adds two lines [Tablet XII, lines 81 and 87], with no counterpart in the known Sumerian manuscripts, calling Enkidu Gilgamesh’s ‘brother’ (*aḫu*) and ‘friend’ (*ibru*).”⁴⁸

With this caveat in place, I now turn to offer a close examination of the way in which, according to the Akkadian epic tradition, the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu is construed.

GILGAMESH AND ENKIDU



When Heroes Love

It was the great Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen, writing in the late 1920s, who first argued that the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu should be understood as sexual in nature.¹ Jacobsen based this suggestion particularly on his interpretation of two of the Gilgamesh Epic's opening scenes: 1. lines 66–76 of Tablet I of the Standard version, which describe how Gilgamesh, before Enkidu's creation, was oppressing Uruk, and 2. lines 24–36 of col. i of the so-called Pennsylvania Tablet of the Old Babylonian version (called this because it was purchased by the University of Pennsylvania Museum in 1914), which quote Gilgamesh as he recounts to his mother the second of two dreams he has had that presage the coming of Enkidu, of an axe that he sees lying in the streets of Uruk (the first dream, in which Gilgamesh envisions something like a meteor that falls upon him from the sky, I will discuss further on in this chapter).² Jacobsen translates the initial of the two passages on which he focuses, from the Standard version's Tablet I, as follows (the brackets in the text are indicated in Jacobsen's translation; the materials found in parentheses are annotations that I have added):³

Gilgameš (Gilgamesh) does not leave the son to his father, day and
 night [
 he is the shepherd of Uruk [
 he is their shepherd and [
 the strong, the magnificent, the skillful [
 Gilgameš (Gilgamesh) does not leave the girl to [
 the daughter of the warrior the bride of heroes [
]

In his comments on these lines, Jacobsen begins by questioning the conventional interpretation of the day, that Gilgamesh oppressed the sons and daughters of Uruk “by forcing the men to labour at the walls of Uruk and by abducting the young women to his harem.” He asks in

particular why the coming of Enkidu should serve as a solution to these problems, given first that Enkidu is nowhere said to have interfered with Gilgamesh's wall-building projects, meaning his coming should offer no relief to Uruk's young men, and also given that Enkidu himself is said to have a voracious sexual appetite, meaning that his coming might more logically increase, rather than ease, the sufferings of Uruk's young women. Because of these concerns, Jacobsen argues, "another explanation" is needed, which he finds in the second passage that he considers.⁴ Jacobsen renders this Old Babylonian text describing Gilgamesh's axe dream as follows (with the exception of the parenthetical question mark found in the fourth line, which is original to Jacobsen's translation, the materials in parentheses contain my glosses):⁵

He (Gilgamesh) lay down and saw another
dream and says to his mother:
"My mother, I have seen another one,
I have seen puzzling things (?); in the street of Uruk of the plazas
lay an axe (*ḥaššinnum*), and
they gathered around it.
The axe (*ḥaššinnum*), its forms were strange;
I saw it and rejoiced,
I loved (*rāmum*) it and cohabited (*ḥabābum*)
with it, as if it were a woman (*kīma aššatim*),
I took it and placed it
at my side (*ana ahīya*)."

In discussing this Old Babylonian axe-dream account, Jacobsen concentrates on the lines in which Gilgamesh envisions himself as "loving" (*rāmum*) and "cohabiting" (*ḥabābum*) with the axe, which it is clear from other parts of the text metaphorically represents Enkidu, "as if it were a woman" (*kīma aššatim*). This, Jacobsen writes, "cannot mean anything but that homosexual intercourse is going to take place between Gilgameš [Gilgamesh] and the newcomer." Jacobsen then points to the lines elsewhere in the Epic that describe Enkidu as "a being of enormous sexual vigor" (for example, the lines that describe Enkidu's six days and seven nights of uninterrupted lovemaking with the prostitute Shamhat). When taken together, Jacobsen argues, these texts indicate that Gilgamesh's behaviors that so oppressed Uruk must have been sexual in nature: that Gilgamesh—whose partially divine nature, according to Jacobsen, endowed him with both superhuman strength and superhuman virility—was seizing Uruk's young men and also young women to satisfy his sexual desires. Enkidu, however, because of his own enormous sexual vigor, was able to meet all of

Gilgamesh's sexual needs, and through their "falling in love with each other," Jacobsen writes, Uruk was "relieve[d] ... of the distress which Gilgamesh [Gilgamesh] inflicted upon it."⁶

Only a few commentators have accepted all of the specifics of this "Enkidu as sexual substitute" analysis since Jacobsen first offered it almost seventy-five years ago,⁷ and indeed Jacobsen himself seems to have abandoned many of his earlier interpretation's details in his later writings. For example, in an article he wrote in the mid-1980s (although it was not published until 1990, just a few years before his death), Jacobsen argues that according to the Old Babylonian version of the Epic, the people of Uruk may have found themselves suffering under Gilgamesh's rule not because they were being sexually exploited but because "he played much too rough in the games of hockey, popular with the youth of Uruk, bruising them sorely." In this same essay, moreover, Jacobsen suggests that according to the Epic's Standard version, it is the building of the walls of Uruk that was the cause of *both* the young men's and the young women's complaints.⁸

Nevertheless, Jacobsen maintained throughout his long career that the Epic of Gilgamesh presumes a sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.⁹ Thus, in his 1976 book *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, he characterizes Gilgamesh's interactions with Enkidu as "a rejection of marriage," and although in the main text of that volume Jacobsen refers to the substitute relationship that Gilgamesh enters into with Enkidu in seemingly nonsexual terms—a "boyhood friendship" engaged in by an immature Gilgamesh, who "like Barrie's Peter Pan," refuses to grow up—he appends a note in which he strongly intimates sexual congress. In this note Jacobsen quotes with approval a 1953 psychiatric text that claims preadolescents, such as Jacobsen understands Gilgamesh to represent, typically experience intimate, loving relationships with members of their own sex that are ultimately superseded, as the subject matures, by "a heterosexual relationship such as is characteristic of adolescence and adulthood."¹⁰ Jacobsen thus suggests, in so many words, that Gilgamesh's relationship with Enkidu is "only a phase." Given that this was one of the most common canards used to describe homosexuality at the time *The Treasures of Darkness* was written, it seems Jacobsen means to imply that Gilgamesh and Enkidu were homosexual lovers. Moreover, in his 1990 article that I mentioned above, Jacobsen quite explicitly identifies Enkidu, at least in the Old Babylonian version of the Epic, as Gilgamesh's "lover" and also writes of Enkidu as Gilgamesh's "beloved," "who takes the place of a young wife."¹¹

Others have followed Jacobsen's lead in order to point to additional

language and imagery within both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions of the Epic that might suggest a sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and a maximalist catalog of this sort of homoeroticized imagery, which is what I attempt in the pages that follow, turns out to be extraordinarily rich and full. As already anticipated by Jacobsen, the descriptions of Enkidu found in Gilgamesh's prescient dreams will prove to be particularly significant, and not just the Old Babylonian axe-dream description on which Jacobsen focused. Equally important is the homoerotic language used by the Standard version in its account of the axe dream and the homoerotic language used by both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions in their accounts of the preceding meteor dream. Other texts of consequence include the wrestling scene in the Old Babylonian version (also partially preserved in the Standard version) in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu first encounter one another and the scene in the Standard version in which they are last together during their lifetimes. Further of note are the scene in Tablet VI of the Standard version in which Gilgamesh spurns the advances of the goddess Ishtar and the scene in the Old Babylonian account in which Gilgamesh rejects the advice of the alewife Siduri to abandon his futile quest for immortality in favor of the pleasures of human society and human sociability. In all I will discuss up to eleven potential examples of the Epic's homoeroticized imagery that should be considered alongside the eroticized and sexualized imagery that Jacobsen located in the Old Babylonian axe-dream account. These eleven examples are

1. the lines in the meteor-and axe-dream passages in the Standard version that, like the Old Babylonian axe-dream account we have already examined, describe Gilgamesh as "loving" (*râmu*) and "caressing" (*ḥabābu*) the metaphorical Enkidu "like a wife" (*kî aššate*);
2. the Old Babylonian version's meteor-dream account in which Gilgamesh is said to "embrace" (*edērum*) the metaphorical Enkidu;
3. the two wordplays *kišru/kezru* and *ḥaššinnu(m)/assinnu(m)* found in the Standard version's meteor-dream account and in the Old Babylonian and Standard versions' axe-dream accounts;
4. the paronomastic reference to Enkidu as Gilgamesh's "brother" (*aḥum*) found in the Old Babylonian axe-dream account, and the several descriptions of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as "brothers" found in the Standard version;
5. the wordplay *zikru/zikaru/sekru* found in the Standard version's account of the creation of Enkidu;
6. various homoeroticized references that are a part of the wrestling-match account as found in the Old Babylonian version and

- also (in fragmentary form) in the Standard version, including
 - a. a possible reference to kissing;
 - b. portrayals of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as replacing women as the objects of each other's (eroticized?) interest;
 - c. the possible use of euphemistic language referring to sexual coupling and genitalia;
- 7. the lines in the Standard version's deathbed scene in which Gilgamesh covers the face of the dead Enkidu "like a bride" (*kî kallati*);
- 8. scenes in which Gilgamesh spurns women, including
 - a. the scene in Tablet VI of the Standard version in which Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar's sexual advances;
 - b. the scene in the Old Babylonian version in which Gilgamesh rejects the alewife Siduri's advice about marriage and family.

Let me now turn to examine each of these aspects of the Epic.

The Standard Version's Meteor- and Axe-Dream Accounts

In the Standard version of the Epic, the description of Gilgamesh's first prescient dream, of a meteor that represents Enkidu, employs much of the same eroticized and sexualized imagery as does the Old Babylonian version's account of the axe dream that I have already discussed. Indeed, as we will see, the Standard version's descriptions of *both* the meteor dream and axe dream use eroticized and sexualized language derived from the Old Babylonian axe-dream account, with Gilgamesh depicted in the Standard version as "loving" (*râmu*) the meteor as well as the axe "like a woman" or (more accurately) "like a wife" (*kî aššate*) and "caressing" it (which seems to be a better translation of Akkadian *ḫabābu* than Jacobsen's "cohabiting" with it).¹² These dream accounts in the Standard version read as follows (Tablet I, lines 228–241, 256–264):

THE METEOR DREAM

Gilgamesh arose and recounted a dream, saying to his mother,
 "Oh, my mother, I saw a dream this night.
 The stars of heaven appeared to me;
 (Something) like a meteor (*kīšru*) of Anu (the god of the heavens within the Mesopotamian pantheon) kept falling upon me.
 I (tried to) lift it, but (it was) too heavy for me;
 I (tried to) turn it over, but I was not able to move it.
 The land of Uruk was standing around it,
 The land was gathered [around it].

Everyone was crowding up to it,
The young warriors were mobbed around it.
They were kissing its feet like (those of) an infant.
[I loved (*râmu*) it] like a wife (*kî aššate*), I caressed (*ḥabābu*) it.
[I lifted it], I laid it at [your] feet.
[And you were to make] it equal to me.”

THE AXE DREAM

[Gilgamesh says] to his mother,
“[My mother, I] have seen a second dream.
[In a street of Uruk-the-Sheepfold] an axe (*ḥaššinnu*) was thrown down,
and they were gathering around it,
[The land of Uruk] was standing around it.
[The land was gathered] around it,
[Everyone was crowding] up to it.
[I lifted it], I laid it at your feet.
[I loved (*râmu*) it] like a wife (*kî aššate*), I caressed (*ḥabābu*) it.
[And you] were to make it equal to me.”

Moreover, when Ninsun, Gilgamesh’s mother, responds by interpreting these dreams for her son, she says of the meteor (Tablet I, lines 244–249, 253):

“The stars of the heavens [appeared] to you;
[(Something) like a meteor (*kišru*) of] Anu kept falling upon you.
[You (tried to) lift it, but (it was) too] heavy for you;
[You (tried to) turn it over, but you were not] able to move it.
[You lifted it, you laid] it at my feet.
[And I will make] it equal to you.

...

[You will love (*râmu*) it like a wife (*kî aššate*)], you (will) caress (*ḥabābu*) it.”

Likewise Ninsun states of the axe (Tablet I, lines 267–269):

“My son, the axe that you saw is a man,
You will love (*râmu*) it like a wife (*kî aššate*), you will caress (*ḥabābu*) it,
And I will make it equal to you.”

Four times in total, that is, the Standard version’s accounts of Gilgamesh’s two prescient dreams apparently use the same vocabulary that is found in the Old Babylonian axe-dream account of

Gilgamesh's "loving" (*râmu*) the objects of his dreams "like a wife" (*kî aššate*) and "caressing" (*ḥabābu*) them. I say "apparently," however, for unfortunately, as the brackets in the above translations indicate, the Standard version text is fragmentary at both points in the meteor-dream account where the crucial verb *râmu*, "to love," occurs, and it is also fragmentary at one of the two crucial points in the axe-dream account, when Gilgamesh recounts the axe dream to his mother. Nevertheless, because the reading "to love" is present at least once in the Standard version's axe-dream passage (in Tablet I, line 268, when Ninsun offers her interpretation of the dream), and because it is present as well in the parallel language found in the Old Babylonian axe-dream account (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. i, line 33), commentators are almost unanimously agreed that it must be correct.¹³ Commentators are in addition almost unanimously agreed that, as Jacobsen originally suggested, the verb *ḥabābu*, "to caress," can be understood as having sexual connotations.¹⁴ Indeed, *ḥabābu* definitely has sexual connotations in the only other passage in the Standard version in which it occurs, in Tablet I, lines 163–177, where it is used, twice (lines 170 and 176), to describe Enkidu's six days and seven nights of intercourse with the prostitute Shamhat. It therefore seems logical—in fact, near mandatory—to conclude that *ḥabābu* has these same sexual connotations in the Standard version's meteor- and axe-dream accounts, especially given that the meteor- and axe-dream accounts as found in the Standard version occur almost immediately subsequent to the Standard version's description of Enkidu's and Shamhat's weeklong stint of lovemaking (the account of the week of lovemaking ends in Tablet I, line 178, and the description of the dreams begins only fifty lines later, in Tablet I, line 228).

This conclusion about the sexual connotations of *ḥabābu* in the Standard version's meteor- and axe-dream passages suggests in turn (in fact, once more near mandates) that we advance an eroticized or, more specifically, a homoeroticized interpretation of the accounts' associated language of "loving" (*râmu*) the metaphorical Enkidu "like a wife" (*kî aššate*). This interpretation is further promoted in the Standard version through the poem's positioning of the two dream texts within the larger narrative. As I have just mentioned, the meteor- and axe-dream accounts as found in the Standard version occur almost immediately subsequent to that text's description of the week Enkidu and Shamhat spent making love, as, shortly after their six days and seven nights of coupling ends, Shamhat tells Enkidu about Gilgamesh's prescient dreams. Then, immediately upon the conclusion of her recital, the two begin making love again (Tablet I, lines 278–279):

[After] Shamhat had told Enkidu Gilgamesh's dreams,
They made love (*râmu*) to one another.

Sex, in short, frames the Standard version's dream accounts, suggesting the dreams, too, must be read in sexualized terms. Also of note is the use of the verb *râmu*, "to love," in this second Shamhat-Enkidu lovemaking passage. We have already seen how the sexual connotations of the verb *ḥabābu*, "to caress," as used in the account of Shamhat's and Enkidu's lovemaking that *precedes* the dream accounts suggest that *ḥabābu* should be understood in a sexual sense when used to refer to Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the subsequent dream passages. So too does the use of the verb *râmu*, "to love," in the Shamhat-Enkidu lovemaking scene that immediately *follows* the reciting of Gilgamesh's dreams suggest this same verb, when used by Gilgamesh to describe Enkidu in his two prescient dreams, should be taken as having a sexual meaning. Through juxtaposition, that is, the Standard version indicates that Gilgamesh's "love" for Enkidu as forecast in the dream recitals of Tablet I, lines 228–276, will be much the same—and thus include the same sort of sexual relationship—that is a feature of the "love" of Enkidu and Shamhat as depicted in Tablet I, lines 278–279.¹⁵

The Old Babylonian version handles the narrative's chronology somewhat differently than it is presented in the Standard version, but ultimately the Old Babylonian makes the same points as does the Standard version text regarding the generally sexualized context of the scene in which the recital of Gilgamesh's prescient dreams is embedded and consequently the sexual connotations of the dream accounts. Indeed, the Old Babylonian version may make the latter of these two points even more blatantly than does the Standard version, by having Gilgamesh reveal his dreams to his mother at *exactly the same time* that Enkidu and Shamhat are engaging in their week of lovemaking (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. ii, lines 2–8):

While Gilgamesh relates the dream,
Enkidu sits before the prostitute.
They made love (*râmu*) to one another.
Enkidu forgot the place where he was born.
For six days and seven nights,
Enkidu was erect,
and he mated Shamhat.

The dreams in the Old Babylonian account are thus positioned in the text so as to suggest that the eroticized and sexualized relationship

that Enkidu and Shamhat are in the midst of enjoying will be mirrored in the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu that is forecast in Gilgamesh's dreams. As in the Standard version, moreover, the correspondence between the two relationships is made explicit through shared vocabulary, the verb *râmun*, "to love," being used by the Old Babylonian version both in the passage I have just quoted that portrays Enkidu's and Shamhat's lovemaking and in the axe-dream account cited on p. 48 that describes the feelings Gilgamesh will have for the metaphorical Enkidu.¹⁶

The Old Babylonian Meteor-Dream Account

As I have just suggested, the way in which Gilgamesh's prescient dreams are positioned narratively in the Old Babylonian account, with Gilgamesh recounting them to his mother Ninsun in Uruk at precisely the same time that Enkidu and Shamhat are making love in the wilderness, serves to advance an erotic and sexual interpretation of these Old Babylonian dream texts. Still, it must be admitted that the Old Babylonian version's description of the meteor dream—which is much more distinguished from the subsequent axe dream than are the meteor- and axe-dream accounts in the conflated Standard version—is not as explicitly sexual as is its axe-dream counterpart.¹⁷ Yet despite the fact that this Old Babylonian meteor-dream passage is not as obviously sexual as is the companion axe-dream account, it is not necessarily devoid of eroticized imagery. The passage reads (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. i, lines 1–14):

Gilgamesh arose, he revealed (his) dream;
He spoke to his mother:
"My mother, in my dream (literally, "in that of my night"),¹⁸
I became majestic, I walked about
In the midst of the young warriors.
The stars of the heavens heaped upon me,¹⁹
The [] of Anu fell on me.²⁰
I lifted it, it was too heavy for me,
I (tried) to move it, I was not able.
The land of Uruk was gathered around it,
The young warriors were kissing its feet.
I leaned my forehead,
They leaned against me.
I lifted it, I brought it to you."

This passage then continues by describing Gilgamesh's mother's

interpretation of this dream, and particularly significant for our purposes is that, in her explanation, Ninsun suggests Gilgamesh will “embrace” (*edērum*) the meteor or the metaphorical Enkidu (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. i, lines 22–23):

“You will embrace (*edērum*) it,
You will bring it/lead it forth (*tarûm*) to me.”

Now it may be that we should understand the embrace envisioned by Ninsun here merely as Gilgamesh’s putting his arms around the meteor to lift it and bring it (*tarûm*) to his mother, similar to the action Gilgamesh reports himself as performing when he describes leaning his forehead, apparently into the stone in order to pick it up, in the his recounting of the dream. However, the fact that the verb *tarûm* can mean “to lead (forth)” as well as “to bring” allows for the possibility that the meteorcum-Enkidu need not be picked up and carried to Gilgamesh’s mother but is able to convey itself into Ninsun’s presence. This in turn allows for the possibility that Gilgamesh’s embrace of this heavenly body is more affectionate or even erotic in nature than it is functional. Indeed, in the Standard version of the Epic, the verb “embrace” (*edēru*) is used *only* to describe how Gilgamesh and Enkidu hug one another in moments that are, if not specifically eroticized, at least highly emotionally charged. Thus, in Tablet II of the Standard version (line 153), Gilgamesh and Enkidu embrace as Gilgamesh attempts to comfort Enkidu when the latter grieves, perhaps over his lack of a father, mother, and other family (although the text is fragmentary at this point and consequently unclear).²¹ As this scene opens, Gilgamesh’s mother seems to be speaking (Tablet II, lines 145–153):

“Enkidu had no [father nor mother],
His hair hung loose [],
He was born on the steppe, no one [].”
Enkidu stood there, he heard [her words],
He became worried and [sank down].
His eyes filled [with tears],
His arms went limp, his strength [turned to weakness].
They (Gilgamesh and Enkidu) seized one another [],
They embraced (*edēru*), their hands like [].

In the Standard version’s Tablet XII, line 85, the two embrace again, when the ghost of the dead Enkidu is released from the netherworld to be reunited with Gilgamesh. As this passage begins, the god Ea,

whom Gilgamesh has beseeched, speaks to the divine Ugur. Elsewhere in Mesopotamian lore Ugur is understood to be the vizier of Nergal, the lord of the underworld, but here he probably represents Nergal himself.²² Ea commands Ugur to take the steps necessary to free Enkidu (Tablet XII, lines 78–85):

“O, young warrior Ugur [],
Now, a hole in the [netherworld you should open up],
So that the ghost [of Enkidu might go forth from the netherworld],
[So that he might tell] to his brother [Gilgamesh the ways of the
netherworld].”
The young warrior Ugur [answered him and].
Now, he opened up a hole in the netherworld,
The ghost of Enkidu went forth from the netherworld like a phantom.
They (Gilgamesh and Enkidu) embraced (*edēru*), and they kissed
(*našāqu*).

To be sure, caution is advisable in assessing the significance of the use of *edēru* in both of these passages, first, because we cannot automatically assume that these two Standard version *edēru* texts can determine the meaning of *edērum* in the Old Babylonian meteor-dream account, given the millennium that stands between the Epic’s Old Babylonian and Standard versions; second, because the latter of the Standard version’s two *edēru* texts comes from Tablet XII, which, as I discussed in [chapter 2](#), is only tenuously affiliated with the other eleven tablets of the Standard version tradition. Still, the parallels these passages offer suggest to me that we should *probably* understand Gilgamesh’s embrace of the metaphorical Enkidu in the Old Babylonian version of the meteor dream to have at least emotional, if not erotic connotations, an interpretation whose likelihood is greatly strengthened, moreover, once we recall the clearly erotic and even sexual connotations of the subsequent axe-dream account as found in the Old Babylonian version and also the larger erotic and sexual connotations of the Enkidu-Shamhat lovemaking scene during which the Old Babylonian dream recitations take place.

In fact, the larger erotic and sexual connotations of the passage in which the Old Babylonian dream recitations take place may suggest a reading in which the *progression* of the meteor dream as followed by the axe dream in the Old Babylonian signifies a relationship in which erotic courtship progresses to sexual consummation. According to such an account, Gilgamesh, when he first encounters the meteor/Enkidu in the Old Babylonian meteor dream, begins to express the attraction he feels, but in a relatively tentative way: through an embrace, and one that need not be understood erotically, either by us,

the Epic's audience, or by the characters who engage in it (lest the attraction between the two fizzle rather than take hold). Yet the attraction, it soon becomes clear, is quite potent, and so Gilgamesh brings/leads the meteor, or the metaphorical Enkidu, to his mother, just as offspring are said to bring new sweethearts to meet their parents elsewhere in the cultures of the ancient Near East: Zipporah, for example, brings her swain Moses to meet her father in Exod 2:20; both Rebekah, in Gen 24:28, and Rachel, in Gen 29:12, bring word of their suitors, Isaac and Jacob, to their parents' households; and a poem from the Sumerian myths of Inanna (who in Akkadian tradition becomes Ishtar) somewhat similarly describes how Inanna's paramour Dumuzi (Akkadian Tammuz) visits Inanna's mother to petition her for permission to court her daughter.²³ This visit to Ninsun, according to the Old Babylonian meteor-dream account, goes well, as Gilgamesh's mother affirms that the meteor/Enkidu is an appropriate match for her son (this becomes especially apparent once we realize that the adverb *minde* with which the mother begins her speech interpreting Gilgamesh's meteor dream [Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet col. i, line 17] should be translated as "certainly," "indeed," or "for sure," as opposed to its more usual meaning of "perhaps" or "possibly": "certainly Gilgamesh," Ninsun states, "one who is like you was born on the steppe").²⁴ Gilgamesh is thus assured that he should go forward with his suit, and consequently, in the axe dream, he responds to the second appearance of an Enkidu icon with much more enthusiasm: he "rejoices" upon seeing the axe (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet col. i, line 32) and expresses his feelings for it more fully: "caressing" the metaphorical Enkidu, "loving" him "like a wife," and placing him at his side.

Line 31 of col. i of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet quotes Gilgamesh as saying to his mother regarding his first visioning of the axe, *ḥaššinumma šani būnūšu*, which is often translated (as, for example, in the Jacobsen rendition quoted above, p. 48), "As for the axe, strange was its appearance." The verb *šanûm* used here, though, could just as easily mean "changed" as "strange," and if this meaning is implied, or even alluded to in the poem, then we could argue that what has really changed here is Gilgamesh's response to the objects of his dreams, his tentative reaction to the meteor—an embrace whose significance might seem to be only functional or, even if affectionate in nature, noncommittal—having been transformed, as Gilgamesh becomes surer about his feelings toward the metaphorical Enkidu, into unambiguous expressions of love.²⁵

Anne Draffkorn Kilmer has further drawn scholars' attention to two terms found in the Standard version's meteor-dream account and in the Standard and Old Babylonian versions' axe-dream accounts that, like *edērum* in the Old Babylonian meteor-dream passage, may not initially seem erotic and/or sexual in nature but may eventually prove to have such connotations. These are *kišru*, which is used in the Standard version meteor-dream account to designate the meteor that Gilgamesh envisions falling from the sky,²⁶ and *ḥaššinnu(m)*, which is used in both the Old Babylonian and Standard version accounts of Gilgamesh's axe dream to designate the axe that Gilgamesh imagines himself as seeing in Uruk's streets. Kilmer suggests that both these words are used paronomastically, with the Standard version's *kišru*, "meteor," being a pun on the term *kezru* and the Old Babylonian and Standard versions' *ḥaššinnu(m)*, "axe," being a pun on the term *assinnu(m)*.²⁷ The first of these paronomastic terms, *kezru*, literally means "a male with curled hair."²⁸ It is only rarely attested, but its more common feminine analog, *kezertu*, "denotes in OB [Old Babylonian] a member of a class of women under the special protection of Ištar [Ishtar], often mentioned beside *ḥarīmtu*-women" (as, for example, in Tablet VI of the Standard version of the Gilgamesh Epic, line 161).²⁹ Because *ḥarīmtu*, moreover, means "prostitute," and because Ishtar is the goddess who more generally has domain over all aspects of sexual behavior, it seems we should understand the character of the female *kezertu*, and by extension the male *kezru*, as being somehow sexualized in nature: "a male wearing his hair in a distinctive manner to suggest prostitution" is how Benjamin R. Foster puts it.³⁰ Such a sexualized connotation further suggests that the *kišru/kezru* wordplay is meant to indicate that the *kišru*, or meteor representing Enkidu that Gilgamesh envisions in the Standard version's first dream account, is an object that, like a prostitute, is intended to entice Gilgamesh sexually.

The *assinnu(m)* is a male who is a part of the cultic entourage of Ishtar and thus someone who, through his associations with the goddess of sex and love, seems to have at least some eroticized aspects to his character.³¹ This again suggests that the *ḥaššinnu(m)/assinnu(m)* pun found in Gilgamesh's axe-dream visions, in both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions, is meant to portray the *ḥaššinnu(m)*, the axe or the metaphorical Enkidu that Gilgamesh imagines seeing in Uruk's streets, as an object that, like an *assinnu(m)*, is meant to arouse his erotic desires. Kilmer concludes, "The implication of the double pun is, of course, that the often suspected, much discussed but of late rejected sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is, after all, the correct interpretation."³² Recall, however, that this "double pun," as Kilmer

describes it, is found only in the Standard version of the Epic, whereas in the Old Babylonian version the eroticized wordplay occurs only in the axe dream. This accords quite well with the reading of the Old Babylonian dream accounts that I have offered above, which suggests that the Old Babylonian meteor-dream passage employs only oblique erotic references, at best, in order to suggest an early, and quite tentative, stage in the Gilgamesh-Enkidu eroticized relationship; only after the attraction becomes clear do we find in the axe-dream text more explicitly erotic and sexual language—including, as Kilmer's analysis would suggest, the *ḥaššinnu(m)/assinnu(m)* wordplay that presents Enkidu as an object of Gilgamesh's erotic interest.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu as Brothers

Another possible wordplay of note for our purposes is found in the lines in the Old Babylonian axe-dream account that occur immediately after Gilgamesh's descriptions of his "loving" the axe "like a wife" and his "caressing it." In these, he tells his mother, *elqēšūma aštakanšu ana ahīya* (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. i, lines 35–36), generally translated as "I took it (that is, the axe) and placed it at my side," as, for example, in the translation of Jacobsen quoted on p. 48 above.³³ This reading understands *ahīya* as the genitive form, with first-person possessive, of *ahum*, "side." But because Akkadian *ahum* can in addition mean "brother," and because the accusative suffix – *šu* that is appended to the verb *leqûm*, "to take," can be translated as "him" as well as "it," this passage might as plausibly be rendered, "I took him (that is, Enkidu) and made him my brother."³⁴ This possibility is significant, because in ancient Near Eastern literature the term *brother*, and also *sister*, can sometimes be used euphemistically to refer to a beloved and/or to the object of one's sexual desire. In the Canaanite Epic of Aqhat, for example, which dates from the mid-second millennium BCE and comes from the northern Levantine city-state of Ugarit, the goddess Anat seems sexually to proposition a human hero Aqhat by saying to him, "You are my brother, and I am [your sister]" (CAT 1.18.1.24).³⁵ The same eroticized language of brother and sister is well known from Egyptian love poetry and from the Hebrew Bible.³⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, for example, the son who is addressed in Prov 7:4–5 is advised to make Lady Wisdom his "sister" and "intimate friend," rather than to consort with Wisdom's antithesis, the "strange woman" or "adulteress."

Other biblical instances of this sort of language are found in the Song of Songs, in which the young woman is repeatedly called by her lover "my sister, my bride" (Cant 4:9, 10, 12, 5:1) and once "my sister, my love" (Cant 5:2). She in turn refers to her paramour as "my brother"

(Cant 8:1). Likewise, in the book of Tobit that is found in Roman Catholic Bibles and in the Greek canon, the marriage of Tobias and Sarah is blessed by her father Raguel with a formula strikingly similar to Anat's words to Aqhat: "You are her brother and she is your sister" (Tob 7:11). Subsequently Tobias refers to his wife Sarah as "sister" (8:4); his father Tobit calls his wife Anna "my sister" (5:21); and Raguel calls his wife Edna "sister" as well (7:15). In addition, in the Roman and Greek Bibles' Additions to Esther D:9 (or in the citation system used in Jerome's Latin translation, Esther 15:9), Esther's husband King Ahasuerus refers to himself as her "brother."³⁷

In Mesopotamian tradition this euphemistic language of eroticized brotherhood can be found especially in Sumerian texts that are associated with the sacred marriage ritual, a rite that is only imperfectly understood by scholars but that is centered around descriptions of a sexual union between a king of one of Sumer's city-states (often Gilgamesh's fief of Uruk) and the goddess Inanna (Akkadian Ishtar), who seems to have been represented in the ritual by one of her priestesses.³⁸ In the epic tale of "Lugalbanda and the Thunderbird," for example, the hero of the story, Lugalbanda, in a speech to Inanna/Ishtar, calls King Enmerkar of Uruk the "brother" of the goddess, presumably because Enmerkar as Uruk's king was the sexual partner of one of the goddess's priestesses in the sacred marriage rite:³⁹

Holy Lugalbanda answered her (saying:)
"Your brother—what did he say,
and what did he add thereunto?
Enmerkar, son of the sun god
what did he say,
and what did he add thereunto?"

Similarly, in a hymn associated with the sacred marriage ritual, the goddess Inanna/Ishtar sings of her "beloved" sexual partner, presumably some king, using the language of "brother." The text reads as follows (the italics indicate points about which the translator is uncertain):⁴⁰

My beloved met me,
Took his pleasure of me, rejoiced *together* with me.
The brother brought me to his house
Made me lie on its ... honey bed,
My precious sweet, having lain by my heart,
In unison, the "tongue-making" in unison,
My brother of fairest face made 50 times.

This same language of eroticized brotherhood is also found in several other sacred marriage hymns. For example, in a hymn called by one of its translators (Samuel Noah Kramer) “Lettuce Is My Hair,” a priestess, speaking for Inanna/Ishtar, sings of her hair, which has been specially coifed in anticipation of her enacting the sacred marriage ritual with her “brother,” King Shu-sin of Ur (ca. 2037–2029 BCE).⁴¹ The italics in the translation again indicate points about which the translator is uncertain:⁴²

My *attendant* arranges it,
The *attendant* (arranges) my hair which is lettuce, the most favored of
plants.
The brother has called me into his life-giving *gaze*,
Shu-sin has called me to his refreshing ...

Another sacred marriage hymn associated by Kramer with Ur’s King Shu-sin (although his name is not actually mentioned in the text) similarly records how the priestesses of Inanna/Ishtar call the king their “brother” as they sing to him in anticipation of the sacred marriage rite. The italics here indicate words that are untranslated from the Sumerian; the notes in parentheses are my additions:⁴³

“You are our brother, [you are our] ...,
[You are] the ... brother of the palace,
You are our *ensi* (the city’s priest-king) of the *magur*-boat,
You are our *nubanda* (a high palace official) of the chariot,
You are our ... of the ... chariot,
You are our city father and judge,
You are the son-in-law of our father,
Brother, you are the son-in-law of our father
You are our most prominent of the sons-in-law,
Our mother provides you with all that is good.”

This text is particularly significant because, toward its end, the priestesses speak simultaneously of the king as their “brother” and as the “son-in-law of our father.” This makes absolutely clear that the king as brother is one who has joined the family of the priestesses/goddess through the ritual of marriage.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, all these sacred marriage hymns come from Sumerian tradition, whereas there are no Akkadian examples of which I am aware in which this same language of eroticized brotherhood is used. This lack of Akkadian examples, however, may simply be due to the vagaries of preservation and discovery, as only a very few

Akkadian love songs have come down to us through the ages (although there was clearly a significant compendium of such songs, as catalogs of love-song titles, one with at least fifty-five entries, are extant).⁴⁵ Note also that the Shu-sin sacred marriage hymns that I have just cited come from only a few decades before the Old Babylonian period of Akkadian history, which is the period to which the Gilgamesh Epic axe-dream text that may paronomastically refer to Enkidu as Gilgamesh's brother dates. Chronologically speaking, therefore, it is certainly possible that the eroticized meaning of brother found in Sumerian sacred marriage hymns could have been known and used by the author(s) of the Old Babylonian axe-dream account. Still, without Akkadian examples, and given the ambiguities of the paronomastic language used in the Old Babylonian axe-dream text, we cannot say definitively whether the eroticized language of brother is in fact deployed by the Old Babylonian tradition in its axe-dream description of Enkidu. My own suspicion, however, is that we should not let the text's ambiguities stymie us, but rather find ways to incorporate them into our interpretation, and so I see in this passage the same sort of double entendre that Kilmer locates in the punning language of *kišru/kezru* and *ḥaššinnu(m)/assinnu(m)* in the Standard and Old Babylonian versions' dream accounts and that may also be found in the twofold meanings of the terms *edērum*, "to embrace," and *tarûm*, "to bring/lead (forth)," used in the Old Babylonian meteor-dream passage. According to such a reading, the reference to the axe Gilgamesh places at his side is simultaneously to be understood as Gilgamesh's entering into a eroticized brotherhood with Enkidu.

Elsewhere, Enkidu and Gilgamesh are called brothers at several points in the Standard version of the Epic. For example, toward the end of Tablet VI of the Standard version, just after Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the Bull of Heaven, they are said to be brothers who sit down together (*ŠEŠ.MEŠ*, which in logographic writing, in which cuneiform signs stand for full words, denotes *aḫū*, "brothers"). The passage reads (Tablet VI, lines 147–152):

After they had slain the Bull of Heaven, they extracted its heart;
 Before Shamash [] they placed (it).
 Stepping back from before Shamash, they prostrated themselves,
 The brothers sat down together.

Gilgamesh likewise seems to be called Enkidu's brother in a fragmentary passage found in Tablet XII of the Standard version (line 81, quoted above on p. 57). There may again be an evocation of the heroes' brotherhood in line 45 of Tablet VIII of the Standard version, where Gilgamesh, lamenting over Enkidu's death, refers to him as the

“axe” at his side. Gilgamesh says (Tablet VIII, lines 41–48):

“Hear me, O young warriors, hear me!
Hear me, O elders of Uruk, hear me!
I will weep for Enkidu, my friend,
Like a wailing woman (*lallaritu*), I will wail bitterly.
The axe at my side (*aḫu*), in which my arm trusted,
The sword at my belt, the shield at my face,
My festive garment, my luxurious sash:
An evil fate arose and robbed me.”

While the other metaphorical images used of Enkidu in this passage (the sword, the shield, the festive garment, and the sash) appear to have no special significance, the description of Enkidu as an axe at Gilgamesh’s side seems a clear reference back to Gilgamesh’s second dream that envisions the coming of Enkidu using the metaphor of an axe. It thus might be seen as referring back to the double entendre of *aḫum*, “side,” and *aḫum*, “brother” that I have argued is present in the Old Babylonian description of that dream vision. As elsewhere, however, we must be clear that it is precarious to assume anything definitive about the relationship between the language of the Old Babylonian and the Standard versions, given the thousand years that separate these two texts.

It is in addition precarious to assume anything definitive regarding the language of brothers that is found in most translations of the opening scene of the Standard version’s Tablet VII, which describes the ominous dream Enkidu has during the night after he, Gilgamesh, and the other young men of Uruk have celebrated Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s victory over the Bull of Heaven. In this dream Enkidu envisions the great gods meeting and deciding that as punishment for the killing of the Bull, and also for the killing of Huwawa/Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest, Enkidu must die. As a bereft Enkidu reports this dream to Gilgamesh, he repeatedly calls him “my brother,” beginning his dream report, for example, by saying, “O my brother, the dream which [I saw] last night!” (line 3), and concluding by saying (lines 19–22):⁴⁶

“O my brother, you are indeed my dear brother. I will [not] be brought up again to my brother from the netherworld. I will take my seat with the shades. [I will cross] the threshold of [the dead], and I will never [see] my dear brother again with my eyes!”

Unfortunately, however, this part of the Epic is preserved for us only in

a prose fragment written in Hittite, and it is thus impossible to say whether the eroticized language of brother was used in any Akkadian version of the text.

The Wordplay zikru/zikaru/sekru

According to Stephanie M. Dalley, yet another wordplay that intimates the eroticized and even possibly sexualized nature of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship is found in the lines in the Standard version's Tablet I that describe the gods' decision to create Enkidu. In this scene Enkidu is twice described using the word *zikru* (lines 79 and 83), which Dalley suggests may allude paronomastically both to the terms *zikaru/zikru*, meaning "male"/"man," and to the term *sekru*, the male analog of the *sekretu*, a woman of high rank often associated with the palace and the king's harem.⁴⁷ Crucial to this proposal is the very unusual use of *zikru* in line 79 of Tablet I. Typically in Akkadian, including elsewhere in the Epic of Gilgamesh (for example, Tablet IV, line 192, Tablet VII, line 130, Tablet IX, line 139, Tablet XI, line 33), *zikru* means "word" or "utterance" as well as "order." Consequently, most commentators presume that in Tablet I, line 83, when the birth goddess Aruru creates Enkidu *zikru ša Anim*, she creates Enkidu according to the "word" or "utterance" or "order" of the god Anu, the head of the pantheon who had decreed that a companion for Gilgamesh should be brought into being. Foster, for example, translates, "She [Aruru] conceived within her what Anu had commanded."⁴⁸ But Tablet I, line 79, which speaks of how Aruru is to create Enkidu as *zikiršu*, "as his/its *zikru*," is more difficult, and several interpreters assume that the pronoun here refers to Gilgamesh and that *zikru* must mean something like "counterpart," "replica," "equivalent," or "equal."⁴⁹ Thus Dalley renders the stanza in which line 79 falls as follows. The gods are speaking to the birth goddess:⁵⁰

"You, Aruru, you created [mankind (?)]!

Now create someone for him (*zikiršu*), to match (?) the ardour (?) of his energies!

Let them be regular rivals, and let Uruk be allowed peace!"

Still, as her many question marks indicate, Dalley considers much of this translation uncertain. What her analysis seems to suggest, though, is that the uncertainty is deliberate and is intended to indicate the ambiguous connotations of *zikru*: first, the term's association with *zikaru/zikru*, "male"/"man," and, second, its association with the *sekru*, which Dalley defines as "cult personnel of uncertain sexual affinities

who were found particularly in Uruk, associated with Ishtar's cult."⁵¹ Enkidu as "his *zikru*" thereby seems described, according to Dalley's reading, as a male and sexual counterpart for Gilgamesh, which is to say, as the male object of Gilgamesh's erotic desire.

The Old Babylonian Wrestling-Match Account

The degree to which we can find homoeroticized imagery in the Old Babylonian version account of the wrestling match in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu first encounter one another is unclear. According to some commentators, the fragmentary opening lines of the so-called Yale Tablet of the Old Babylonian version (called this because it is a part of the Yale University Babylonian Collection) describe how Gilgamesh and Enkidu kiss and become friends after their combat comes to an end (col. i, lines 19–20).⁵² They kiss as well in the Standard version, in Tablet XII, line 85, when the ghost of the dead Enkidu is released from the netherworld to return to Gilgamesh (quoted above on p. 57). However, as I have previously noted, the relevance of Tablet XII for our analysis of the Gilgamesh Epic is disputed, and there are also many scholars of the Epic who are less confident about understanding the Yale Tablet's fragmentary opening lines as a part of the wrestling-match scene than are the commentators I have just mentioned. The significance of kissing within the ancient Near Eastern world, too, is a matter of some debate. In our culture such an act typically implies intimacy, and often eroticized intimacy. But while ancient Near Eastern kissing can similarly be interpreted as an indication of love or affection, it is often to be understood as an act of homage offered by an inferior to a superior (as in, for example, Tablet VI, line 15, Tablet VII, line 141, and Tablet VIII, line 85). Or, when exchanged between equals, it can signify respect (as, for instance, in 2 Sam 20:9).⁵³

Still, because they fit so well, it is tempting to read the Yale Tablet's opening lines as being a part of the wrestling-match scene, and it is furthermore tempting to read both of the Old Babylonian and Standard version scenes in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu kiss as having at least some erotic connotations. I have already suggested concerning the Standard version's Tablet XII passage, for example, that the context there, if not explicitly erotic, is at least highly emotionally charged, and thus Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's hugging and kissing upon being reunited after Enkidu's descent into the netherworld need to be understood in some sense as affectionate. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the insistence of the Tablet XII text on *reciprocal* hugging and kissing, which at least precludes the possibility that the kiss and hug are expressions of homage; these acts must rather be understood as signifying respect or affection. As I have already indicated, the

highly emotional context of the overall passage suggests to me that the latter is the correct interpretation, and I would likewise suggest that the kiss Gilgamesh and Enkidu seem to exchange in the Old Babylonian version after their wrestling match is finished should also be interpreted as somehow affectionate. Certainly, the fact that, as in Tablet XII, it is reciprocated (“*They* kissed and formed a friendship”; emphasis mine) means again that the kiss cannot be taken as an indication of obeisance.

The highly sexualized context of the larger passage of which the wrestling-match scene is a part may further suggest the kiss Gilgamesh and Enkidu seem to exchange at their combat’s end is one that goes beyond affection to have erotic connotations. I should quickly say, however, that the specific interpretation of the larger passage in which the wrestling match occurs is contested. Still, the basic parameters seem clear: Gilgamesh is getting ready to bed a woman as part of her marriage celebration.⁵⁴ This woman is understood by some as a priestess whom Gilgamesh, as king of Uruk, is required to bed according to the Mesopotamian tradition of sacred marriage that I have described above. But it seems more likely, according at least to the Old Babylonian tradition (which is much better preserved than the Standard version at this point), that the marriage about to be celebrated could be between any man and woman resident in Uruk and that Gilgamesh intends, as it is implied he regularly did, to claim some kingly privilege of bedding the bride on her wedding night before her new husband was allowed to do so (the so-called *ius primae noctis* or *droit de cuissage*).⁵⁵ The crucial lines read (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. iv, lines 26–30):

He (Gilgamesh) is first,
Then the husband is afterwards.
By the counsel of Anu, it is ordered:
With the cutting of his umbilical cord,
She was decreed for him.

Enkidu, while still living in the countryside, hears about this practice from a stranger en route to the festivities and resolves to put an end to it. He thus comes to Uruk and confronts Gilgamesh (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. vi, lines 8–10):

Enkidu obstructed the gate with his foot,
He did not give entrance to Gilgamesh.

Next (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. vi, lines 11–19):

They took hold of each other like a bull,
They bent.
They destroyed the doorpost,
The wall shook.
Gilgamesh and Enkidu
Took hold of each other,
Like a bull they bent.
They destroyed the doorpost,
The wall shook.

As the text continues, this wrestling match comes to an end, albeit somewhat abruptly, with Gilgamesh suddenly dropping to one knee (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. vi, lines 20–21). Interpreters have differed on what this gesture means: does it depict Gilgamesh as victorious, or does it indicate that Enkidu has prevailed, or does it signify that the contest is to be considered a stalemate?⁵⁶ Yet however we understand the outcome, what is important for our purposes at this point is that the confrontation apparently ends, according again to the fragmentary opening lines of the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, with the two combatants' kiss and with their becoming fast friends. The marriage festivities, and any claim Gilgamesh might make regarding the bridal bed, are almost instantly forgotten, as Gilgamesh immediately turns to focus exclusively on his interactions with Enkidu and especially on the heroic adventures that these two comrades undertake together.

Indeed, so immediate is this shift in Gilgamesh's attentions that it becomes practically impossible not to suggest that the Epic's wrestling scene represents some transfer of the narrative's sexual imagery and energy and thus practically impossible not to suggest that the Epic means us to see Enkidu as replacing the young bride as the object of Gilgamesh's eroticized interest. This is further suggested by the fact that as Enkidu enters Uruk to confront Gilgamesh he is arguably portrayed as a sexual *provocateur*. More specifically, according to line 20 of col. v of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, he is said, upon entering Uruk, to be "correct" or "upright" in appearance.⁵⁷ The word used here for "upright" (*išarum*), however, also means "penis," which I would once more propose to interpret in terms of a double entendre: as Enkidu comes into Uruk to engage Gilgamesh, he is imagined as magnificent in appearance and as sporting a magnificent erection.⁵⁸ Furthermore, according to the Standard version, Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet as if they were bride and groom, at the very door of the *bīt emūti* or marital chamber (Tablet II, line 93),⁵⁹ a detail that becomes particularly significant if we interpret their combat in terms of yet another double entendre, the two heroes' grappling a "euphemistic

description of a different sort of wrestling.”⁶⁰ Gwendolyn Leick, who makes this suggestion, further proposes that the reference to Enkidu using his foot to block the gate (in the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. vi, line 9) or the door of the wedding chamber (in the Standard version, Tablet II, line 91) may be of significance, given the well-known usage of feet as euphemistic for genitalia in, at least, the West Semitic world.⁶¹

It is in addition worthy of note that it is almost precisely at this point in the Epic (in line 3 of col. v of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet), that Enkidu’s female paramour, the prostitute Shamhat, who has until this moment been the object of his quite fervid sexual interest, makes her last appearance as an actor in the text.⁶² Much like Gilgamesh, that is, Enkidu is represented within the context of the Epic’s wrestling scene as leaving behind a woman to whom he has previously been devoting his copious sexual attentions in order to focus exclusively thereafter on his interactions with a male counterpart. As Neal Walls writes, “In contrast to their previous exploitation of heterosexual relations, neither Gilgamesh nor Enkidu exhibits any desire for women after their meeting. This suggests that their erotic drives are fulfilled in each other.”⁶³ The transferal of Enkidu’s erotic interests seems to have been presaged, moreover, already at the time of Enkidu’s and Shamhat’s first meeting. In the Standard version, at least, the first words Shamhat is reported as speaking to Enkidu, immediately subsequent to their six days and seven nights of uninterrupted lovemaking, urge him to leave the wilderness for Uruk, there to encounter Gilgamesh. Enkidu, we are told, agreed, “knowing in his heart he should have a friend” (Tablet I, lines 196–197). “Knowing in his heart,” we might interpret the Standard version as suggesting, that he should have a companion who will satisfy him more than even the seemingly tireless Shamhat has been capable of, and thus knowing that he should transfer his attentions—including his eroticized attentions?—from the prostitute to Gilgamesh. This point seems to be stressed as well in the Old Babylonian version, although there it is presented somewhat differently, as that text’s description of Enkidu’s magnificent erection upon entering Uruk to engage Gilgamesh (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. v, line 20) can be interpreted as the replacement of and even as the successor to the magnificent erection Enkidu sustained for six days and seven nights while making love with Shamhat (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. ii, line 7). Note again Walls’s comments: “Enkidu’s physical lust for Shamhat’s body is merely his apprenticeship to desire before accepting his true vocation in loving Gilgamesh.”⁶⁴

Another highly eroticized scene in the Epic of Gilgamesh is the passage in Tablets VII and VIII in which Enkidu falls sick and dies and in which Gilgamesh grieves over his corpse. Particularly significant here is the description of how Gilgamesh covers the face of the dead Enkidu “like a bride” (Tablet VIII, lines 58–61):

He covered the face of his friend like a bride (*kî kallati*),⁶⁵
Like an eagle, he circled above him.
Like a lioness whose cubs are in a pit,
He paced to and fro, forwards and backwards.

Presumably, the reference here to Gilgamesh covering the dead Enkidu’s face alludes to the Mesopotamian tradition of placing a veil over a woman’s face when she was wed in order to mark her marital status.⁶⁶ The metaphor thus recalls Gilgamesh’s meteor and axe dreams, in the Standard version, and his axe dream, in the Old Babylonian version, that envision Enkidu as being “like a wife” to Gilgamesh. It thereby suggests, as do the events of the wrestling scene we have just examined, that Gilgamesh and Enkidu assume spouselike roles for one another. Indeed, when taken together, the wrestling and deathbed scenes suggest that Gilgamesh and Enkidu assume roles as spouselike companions for one another throughout the entire period of time that they spend together, from the moment they meet “until death do them part.” The portrayal found in the deathbed scene, moreover, imagines them as intensely devoted spouses, as is indicated by the depth of grief—and so the depth of loving attachment—that Gilgamesh expresses in his lament over his deceased comrade. He is said to mourn bitterly, “like a wailing woman” (*lallaritu*; Tablet VIII, line 44, quoted above on p. 65), or, as Kilmer interprets, “like a widow.”⁶⁷

Gilgamesh’s Rejections of Ishtar’s Advances and Siduri’s Advice

Yet another scene that should be discussed in relation to the Epic’s homoerotic imagery is the episode in Tablet VI in which the goddess Ishtar approaches Gilgamesh after he has returned victorious from the campaign against Huwawa/Humbaba and has reclothed himself in his city finery. Ishtar makes a clear proposition of marriage to Gilgamesh (“You can be my husband, and I can be your wife”; line 9), which Gilgamesh vehemently and sarcastically rejects—because, some commentators have asked, he prefers his relationship with Enkidu?⁶⁸ Note in this regard that, as Tzvi Abusch points out, Gilgamesh’s refusal is otherwise strange. Despite Gilgamesh’s claims, the descriptions of

how Ishtar mistreated her former lovers do not prove that she will treat Gilgamesh in the same way; furthermore, we would not necessarily expect that Gilgamesh, who until this point in the Epic has never hesitated to meet even the most fearsome of challenges head-on, would “imagine himself vulnerable to that which might harm a lesser being.” In fact, we might have predicted just the opposite, that Gilgamesh would “be tempted by the challenge that she [Ishtar] poses” and be tempted too by her offer of “status, power, wealth.” We might in addition have predicted that such a great hero, having just returned from defeating a mighty male monster, would follow up by bedding a woman.⁶⁹ Yet despite all this, Gilgamesh spurns the goddess. We might therefore contend,⁷⁰ as Walls writes, that this rejection is “indicative of homoerotic desire,” that “Gilgamesh’s denial of the goddess privileges masculine appeal and the desire for male companionship.”⁷¹

Quite striking in this respect is how often the verb “to love” (*râmu*) is used in the “rejection of Ishtar” passage, especially in Gilgamesh’s disdainful reply to Ishtar’s proposal, in which he enumerates all those she has “loved,” or who have “loved her,” yet whom she has scorned: Dumuzi (line 42), the *allallu* bird (line 48), the lion (line 51), the horse (line 53), the shepherd (line 58), Ishullanu, the gardener of Ishtar’s father, Anu (line 64), and, potentially, Gilgamesh himself (line 79). Notably, there are only two other points in the Epic where this verb “to love” is employed in such a concentrated fashion: in the two dream accounts of the Standard version, which repeatedly describe how Gilgamesh will love the metaphorical representations of Enkidu that he envisions (Tablet I, lines 239, 253, 263, and 268), and in Tablet X, in the speeches Gilgamesh makes to the alewife Siduri, the ferryman Urshanabi (earlier Sursunabu), and the flood hero Utnapishtim about his grief over losing Enkidu, “whom I loved” (Tablet X, lines 60, 61, 72, 73, 134, 135, 144, 233, 234, 245, and 246). It is tempting to juxtapose these three different assemblages of loving and thus to suggest that Enkidu, both before Gilgamesh ever met him and long after he died, was to Gilgamesh the love that Ishtar, despite her offer of marriage, would never be. Jacobsen similarly draws our attention to an account found in a fragmentary Old Babylonian text originally published in 1902 by Bruno Meissner (and hence usually called the Meissner Fragment), in which the alewife Siduri speaks to Gilgamesh when he encounters her on the shores of a cosmic sea, toward the end of his journey to see Utnapishtim.⁷² In this scene Siduri urges Gilgamesh to abandon his wanderings in order to return to Uruk and find contentment in a wife and children, counsel that Gilgamesh rejects, significantly to Jacobsen, “in terms of his attachment to Enkidu.” Jacobsen concludes, “Throughout the epic the relationship with Enkidu competes with, and

replaces, marriage.”⁷³ Kilmer concurs: “Gilgamesh and Enkidu enjoyed a loving sexual relationship.”⁷⁴

The Ambiguity of Eros

Despite, however, the forceful claims advanced by scholars such as Jacobsen and Kilmer, and despite the collocation of data I have just rehearsed on which claims like Jacobsen’s and Kilmer’s depend, there are many interpreters of the Gilgamesh Epic, and perhaps even a majority, who argue that the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu should *not* be understood as sexual in nature. Substantial evidence, moreover, can be brought forward in support of these arguments. Most obvious, perhaps, is the fact that “the text of the epic as preserved nowhere portrays sexual contact as taking place between the two heroes.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, as I have already hinted, many of the more implicit references that suggest a sexualized relationship are not totally secure. *Edērum*, “to embrace,” may have no eroticized connotations in the Old Babylonian account of Gilgamesh’s meteor dream, and, in the term’s occurrences in Tablets II and XII of the Standard version, it may indicate only Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s strong emotional bond without implying erotic attraction. The two points in the epic tradition where Gilgamesh and Enkidu kiss may likewise indicate types of bonding other than sexual.

Wilfried G. Lambert has also argued, regarding the language of the Old Babylonian and Standard version dream accounts, that when “loving for sexual pleasure is meant, the Babylonian term is not ‘love a wife,’” *aššatu(m)*, but “‘love a woman,’” *sinništu(m)*. Thus, as Lambert sees it, “the emphasis of the dream[s] may be on the steadfastness of the love, rather than on [their] sexuality.” Furthermore Lambert contends that it is not necessarily the case that the *symbolic* meaning of the dreams, even if sexual, is to be taken literally.⁷⁶ Martti Nissinen has in addition called into question the sexualized interpretation Kilmer has offered of, especially, the *ḥaššinnu(m)/assinnu(m)* pun found in Gilgamesh’s axe-dream vision. While neither denying the presence of the wordplay, nor denying the association of the *assinnu(m)* with the cult of Ishtar, the goddess of sex and love, Nissinen insists that the *assinnu(m)* should be described as asexual rather than eroticized in character, a eunuchlike individual who, in the words of one text, typically “fails to achieve a sexual climax during intercourse.”⁷⁷ This, as Nissinen writes, is hardly Enkidu’s “emphasized masculinity.”⁷⁸

It is further unclear whether the Epic’s descriptions of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as brothers can be taken as referring euphemistically to the two heroes as one another’s beloved and/or the object of one

another's sexual desire. As I have already noted, I cannot cite any parallels to the language of eroticized brotherhood that come from *within* Akkadian tradition, and while this may be the result only of the idiosyncrasies of preservation and discovery, it is nevertheless—given our generally quite large corpus of Akkadian manuscripts—a matter of some concern. Moreover, while the Sumerian, Ugaritic, and biblical examples that I cited in the first section of this chapter are helpful and suggestive,⁷⁹ in all of them the terms *brother* and also *sister* are used to refer to lovers and/or objects of sexual desire who are members of the opposite sex. Thus, in Sumerian sacred marriage texts, it is the goddess Inanna or her priestesses who speak of the king as brother, and in Ugaritic tradition, it is Anat who speaks in this way of the male Aqhat, whom she propositions. Likewise, in the biblical materials, it is the male and female lovers who call each other brother and sister in the Song of Songs; the husbands Tobias, Tobit, and Raguel who call their wives sister in the deuterocanonical book of Tobit; and another husband, King Ahasuerus, who refers to himself as his wife's brother in the Additions to Esther.

Indeed, only one time in all of Sumerian, Ugaritic, and biblical tradition might the term *brother* be used to refer to one man as the object of another man's erotic interest: this is in 2 Sam 1:26, when David refers to Jonathan as "my brother" (*'āhī*). As I will discuss more thoroughly in [chapter 7](#), the larger context in which this epithet is found—it is a part of the lament in which David compares Jonathan's love for him to the love of women—may suggest that David's description of Jonathan as his brother is to be taken as eroticized in nature. But the David and Jonathan story, as we will also see in [chapter 7](#), is as shot through with the language of covenant bonding as it is with the language of erotic attraction, and, as Saul M. Olyan will argue in a forthcoming article, the term *brother* in 2 Sam 1:26 might well be understood as part of this covenant tradition: *brother* often means "covenant partner" in treaty texts of the West Semitic world.⁸⁰ We cannot, therefore, claim 2 Sam 1:26 as a secure parallel for the possible use of *brother* in a homoeroticized sense in the Gilgamesh Epic.

And then there is the problem that I would take to be the most significant for those who advocate that the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu should be understood as erotic or even sexual in nature: the dangers of "trying to map" our own sexual categories onto ancient texts "and onto the erotic and emotional patterns contained in them."⁸¹ Certainly, the two most emphatic proponents of a sexualized interpretation of the Gilgamesh-Enkidu relationship, Kilmer and Jacobsen, must be faulted in this regard, as they both rather facetiously assume that our conception of homosexuality—and the dichotomy it

posits of homosexual versus heterosexual—is applicable across time and space and so applicable in the ancient Mesopotamian world. Jacobsen especially, in arguing that Gilgamesh has a relationship with Enkidu that “replaces marriage,” seems guilty of presuming that the peoples of the ancient Near East categorized sexual identity according to the either/or dichotomy used in modern Euro-American culture and thus shared our society’s sense that one is *either* heterosexual, and so in, or preferring to be in, an opposite-sex relationship such as marriage, *or* homosexual, and so in, or preferring to be in, a relationship with a partner of the same sex. Kilmer is perhaps more circumspect, but she does quote Jacobsen’s comments about Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s relationship as an alternate to marriage with approval, which suggests that she, like Jacobsen, posits a Mesopotamian heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy analogous to what is found in contemporary Euro-American society.

However, as my discussions in [chapter 1](#) should lead us to expect, our evidence, while somewhat sparse, clearly indicates that our cultural conceptions about heterosexuality and homosexuality do not hold in the ancient Mesopotamian context.⁸² Rather, as three texts from the Middle Assyrian Laws (ca. 1225 BCE) that speak of acts of sexual intercourse particularly demonstrate, the Mesopotamian system of categorizing and understanding same-sex (and opposite-sex) erotic and sexual interactions was very different from our own. The first (MAL A §18) describes the punishments that will be incurred by a man who falsely spreads rumors that accuse another man’s wife of having intercourse outside her marriage. The second (MAL A §19) describes similar punishments that will be incurred by a man who falsely spreads rumors claiming that another man, called his *tappā’u*, “comrade,” “colleague,” “companion,” or even “neighbor,” is having sex with men. The third (MAL A §20) describes what will happen to a man who actually does have sex with his male *tappā’u* or “comrade.” The punishment for the latter crime is particularly severe; the accused, if found guilty, will be used sexually and then castrated. This text reads:⁸³

§20 If a man has intercourse (*nāku*) with his comrade (*tappāšu*) and they prove the charges against him and find him guilty, they shall have intercourse (*nāku*) with him and they shall turn him into a eunuch.

Crucial to note here for our purposes is that MAL A §20, while it certainly understands that two men are involved in the proscribed sexual act, pronounces punishment for only one. It pronounces, moreover, an initial punishment (“they shall have intercourse with him”) that seems to follow the principle of *lex talionis*, the law of retribution

that requires of the convicted that he suffer the same harm that he is understood to have done to another. The issue in MAL A §20, therefore, is not a condemnation of homosexuality as we generally understand it—sexual interactions between persons of the same sex who are motivated by mutual desire for one another—but a condemnation of a sexual act of penile penetration that one man, as understood by this law, has wrongly performed upon another.⁸⁴ The law, to be sure, is unclear about what exactly was wrong about the performance. Was the sexual act nonconsensual and so the accused is guilty of rape?⁸⁵ Or is the problem here that the accused, in penetrating a *tappā'u* or “comrade,” has penetrated a social equal rather than a social inferior, even though it may only be an inferior, as in the Greco-Roman world, that the Middle Assyrian Laws considered a legitimate object of a superior’s erotic desire?⁸⁶ Or, as Olyan and Ken Stone have argued for ancient Israel,⁸⁷ is any placing of a male in the sexually receptive position considered wrong in the Mesopotamian world, regardless of issues of consent and regardless of issues of social status?

The Israelite evidence, because it is roughly contemporaneous with the Middle Assyrian Laws and because it comes from another Semitic culture, suggests to me that the latter proposition is the case: that the placing of any man in the sexually receptive position is considered wrong in the Mesopotamian world.⁸⁸ Indeed, it is tempting to read the punishments prescribed by MAL A §20 in the light of Olyan’s and Stone’s analyses in order to suggest that both halves of the punishment the convicted suffers, being used sexually and castration, are to be understood as examples of the *lex talionis*. It is tempting, that is, to suggest first, that as Olyan, Stone, and also Phyllis A. Bird have shown for Israelite society,⁸⁹ Mesopotamian tradition believes it to be wrong to place any man in the receptive position in male-male sexual intercourse because it improperly feminizes him. Mesopotamian law, I would then suggest, avenges this improper feminization by requiring that the perpetrator be feminized himself, initially by being placed in the feminized or receptive position in sexual intercourse and then by being made womanlike through castration.

Important support for this thesis can be found in MAL A §20’s use of the verb *nāku* to describe the act of male-male coupling. As Lambert has pointed out, this verb, which is normally used in Akkadian to describe male-female intercourse, is gendered in its usage. Thus, while “in grammar, the verb has the theoretical possibility to express mutual action,” in actual texts “the man always does the act to the woman, never the other way around.”⁹⁰ As in the world of classical Athens that I described in [chapter 1](#), that is, intercourse seems understood in Mesopotamia as a matter of use, the use an active

(always male) partner makes of a passive (typically female) one. For a man to make use sexually of another male, it follows, is to treat him as if he were a woman, or to feminize him, and this is what I suggest MAL A §20 regards as improper and avenges, according to the *lex talionis*, by placing the perpetrator in the passive or female position and then by castrating him.

Still, whatever precise interpretation we adopt of MAL A §20, what is crucial to note for our purposes is the law's inherent assumption that in the Mesopotamian worldview, male-male sex was necessarily defined in terms of an active-passive dichotomy that is perceived as inappropriate between two comrades or equals. Indeed, it seems that in Mesopotamian thought, as in the Greco-Roman world, the idea of any sexual union, whether same-sex or opposite-sex, between equals or peers was "virtually inconceivable."⁹¹ As Nissinen writes, "neither homosexual acts nor heterosexual acts were considered as being done by two equals."⁹² Equals, however, is the way the Epic of Gilgamesh repeatedly describes Gilgamesh and Enkidu.⁹³ According to most commentators, for example, the Old Babylonian and Standard version dream accounts state at no less than *five* different points that, once Enkidu is brought to her, Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, will make him her son's "equal" (*šutamḫuru(m)*; see the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. ii, line 1, and, in the Standard version, Tablet I, lines 241, 249, 264, and 269).⁹⁴ Enkidu is also called Gilgamesh's *meḫrum*, "equal," "equivalent," or "counterpart," in the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. v, line 22, after the two heroes actually meet, and Gilgamesh is similarly called Enkidu's *talimu*, or "equal," in Tablet VII, line 137, of the Standard version. They are further described in the Standard version as a "match" for one another (*mašālu*; Tablet I, line 80, Tablet II, line 32) and possibly even as "doubles" (*šanānu*; Tablet I, line 81).⁹⁵ Moreover, they are said at several points to be precisely the sort of comrade or colleague to each other (*tappā'u*, or *tappû*) of which MAL A §20 speaks (see Tablet I, lines 250 and 270, Tablet III, lines 4 and 9, Tablet IV, line 255, Tablet VII, line 136).

And it is not just language, but the Epic's content, too, that presents Gilgamesh and Enkidu as equal to one another. To be sure, Gilgamesh is at one point said by Shamhat to have "a strength more mighty" than Enkidu's (Tablet I, line 221); at another point, however, Enkidu is said by the huntsman whose traps he keeps dismantling to be "the mightiest in the land" (Tablet I, line 107).⁹⁶ Possibly, we as the Epic's audience are to understand that one of these two speakers must be wrong, but more likely, as I suggest here, is that both are to be taken in some sense as correct and that Gilgamesh and Enkidu are thus to be taken as equally strong in respect to one another.⁹⁷ It also may be that the wrestling match in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu first

encounter one another ends in a standstill, which would further suggest that the two heroes are equally matched in terms of their physical prowess (although, unfortunately the text is unclear).⁹⁸

Certainly, though, Gilgamesh and Enkidu seem equal partners in their two great adventures together, the struggles against Huwawa/Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. In the former episode Enkidu's encouragement and counsel is critical. In fact, in the scenes that describe the two heroes' preparations for this expedition, the counsel Enkidu will be able to give is identified, in both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions, as not only critical but *essential* to the enterprise's success. Thus, in the Old Babylonian version, the elders with whom Gilgamesh consults about the proposed mission tell him *not* to trust in his own strength (Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, line 249). They say instead (Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, lines 251–256):

“Let Enkidu go in front.

He is aware of the way, he has traveled the road;

He knows the entrances to the forest,

(He knows) all of Huwawa's tricks.

Enkidu will protect (his) friend,

His eyes see clearly; he will safeguard you.”

In the Standard version essentially the same advice, entrusting Gilgamesh to Enkidu's care, is repeated, and there twice, once uttered by Uruk's elders, as in the Old Babylonian version, and then offered a second time, perhaps by Uruk's young warriors (although the passage is very fragmentary).⁹⁹ In addition, in the Standard version, when the two heroes finally come to the Cedar Forest, it is Enkidu, according to the Epic's Tablet V, who actually gives the command to slay Huwawa/Humbaba, while Gilgamesh considers letting him live. Moreover, Huwawa/Humbaba is depicted as so cognizant of the fact that it is Enkidu's decree that will determine his fate that he says to Enkidu, “(My) release lies with *you*” (emphasis mine). Huwawa/Humbaba then urges Enkidu to ask Gilgamesh to spare his life (Tablet V, lines 197–198).

In their latter confrontation with the Bull of Heaven, the two heroes likewise seem presented as comrades who, in terms of strength, complement one another as they work in tandem to kill the Bull, Enkidu immobilizing it from the rear while Gilgamesh drives in his knife from the front. Furthermore, according to the Hittite text at the beginning of Tablet VII, when the gods debate the appropriate punishment for the killing of these two fearsome creatures, they consider both Gilgamesh and Enkidu equally culpable, even though they ultimately decree that only one—Enkidu—must die. Lambert has further noted that artistic

representations of Gilgamesh and Enkidu sometimes portray them as indistinguishable, citing in particular Mitanni and Nuzi seals that represent the two heroes identically in depicting their victory over Huwawa/Humbaba.¹⁰⁰

The people of Uruk perhaps best sum up all this evidence, and the way in which it points to the two characters' fundamental equivalence, when they say about Enkidu (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. v, lines 10–12, 21–22):

“He is similar to Gilgamesh in form,
Shorter in stature,
(But) stronger of bone

...

As for the godlike Gilgamesh,
An equal (*meḫrum*) is here for him.”

And the implication that follows for our purposes? It is, as I have already noted, that scholars such as Jacobsen and Kilmer must be wrong; that the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu cannot be understood as sexual in nature, given that our conception of “two men involved as equals in a voluntary homoerotic relationship ... for mutual satisfaction” is fundamentally alien to the Mesopotamian mind.¹⁰¹

But how then are we to understand Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's interactions? Among those who have argued against a sexualized interpretation, the most common answer is that the relationship should be seen as a deeply bonded friendship. Nissinen, William G. Doty, and David M. Halperin are among those who characterize Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship in this way, Nissinen and Doty both describing it as one that is *homosocial* without being *homoerotic* (Nissinen's preferred terminology) or *homosexual* (the terminology used by Doty). More specifically, Nissinen sees in the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu the kind of close friendship that he thinks often develops between men in cultures such as those of the ancient Near East, in which “men's and women's worlds are segregated.”¹⁰² Doty makes a somewhat similar point, arguing that our society so tends to assume that men's closest relationships need to be with their wives, or at least with women with whom they are erotically and sexually involved, that it fails to value, or even recognize, close male-male friendships. But this, Doty argues, is what the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu represents: the Epic of Gilgamesh, in his words, “*is the story of the ideally possible male bond*”; it is “about masculine feelings and about expressing them”; it “indicates just how important male friendships are, and how significant to social well-being.”¹⁰³ Yet as this last comment might suggest, Doty's ultimate goal is very different from Nissinen's, for

while Nissinen is primarily interested in what I called in my prologue a “documentary” approach to the Epic of Gilgamesh—using the Epic to illuminate the nature of social relations in the era it purports to describe—Doty’s interest relates predominantly to our culture, as he wishes to take the Epic’s characterization of Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s relationship as a “prospective symbol for what is possible within male friendships” today.¹⁰⁴

Halperin’s goal is different still: as a classicist, his primary interest is in discussing the relationship of the heroic comrades of Homer’s *Iliad*, Achilles and Patroclus, which he believes is best illuminated when “Achilles and Patroclus are compared to similar pairs of heroic warriors in ... other texts from roughly the same period,” including Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Achilles’ and Patroclus’ interactions, Halperin argues, are, like Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s, best described in terms of friendship, although not friendship as some “universal social category” but “a specific cultural formation, a type of heroic friendship that is better captured by terms like comrade-in-arms, boon companions, and the like.”¹⁰⁵ In making this claim, Halperin cites the work of Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, who, like him, look to some specific forms of institutionalized friendship found in non-Western society—“blood brotherhood, trade friends, and bond friends”—in order to help illuminate what they understand to be the great male friendships of Western literature, including the friendships of Gilgamesh and Enkidu and Achilles and Patroclus. These they describe as “dyadic relationship[s]” characterized by “undying loyalty, devotion, and intense emotional gratification.”¹⁰⁶ Both Thomas van Nortwick and Charles R. Beye concur, describing the relationships of Gilgamesh and Enkidu and of Achilles and Patroclus in terms of “male bonding.”¹⁰⁷ Beye in particular insists “there is no sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.” “Ancient narrators,” he writes, “not silenced by the imperatives of a Judaeo-Christian culture, were explicit about sexuality and would have made clear any sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The same holds true for Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*.”¹⁰⁸

Yet even as they insist that the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu should not be understood as sexual in nature, many of the commentators who argue for the “relationship as friendship” interpretation admit, as I have discussed in the first section of this chapter, that the two heroes’ interactions are described using a wealth of homoerotic imagery, and much more homoerotic imagery than we would necessarily expect to be used of a nonsexualized relationship, even a nonsexualized relationship as close and deeply bonded as Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s is said to be. Indeed, although parts of the evidence I advanced in the first section might be considered suspect,

the presence of homoerotic overtones in some of the Epic's descriptions of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship seems indisputable. For example, while the verb *edērum*, "to embrace," need not have eroticized connotations when it is used in the Old Babylonian meteor-dream account, the overall tenor of the Old Babylonian and also the Standard version dream recitations still appears highly sexual. In both versions the dreams are recounted within the same scene during which Enkidu and Shamhat ardently make love; in both versions the verb *rāmu*, "to love," that Gilgamesh uses of the metaphorical Enkidu is used as well to describe Enkidu's and Shamhat's weeklong intercourse; and, in the Standard version, the verb *ḥabābu*, "to caress," is likewise used both in the descriptions of Enkidu's week of sexual interaction with Shamhat and Gilgamesh's envisioned relations with Enkidu. That Gilgamesh, according to both versions, will love Enkidu "like a wife" may further imply sexual intercourse. As I noted above, this reading has been challenged only by Lambert,¹⁰⁹ and his argument has been effectively countered by Jerrold S. Cooper, who points out, first, that the verb *ḥabābu* used in conjunction with the "loving like a wife" passages, "when used for human activity *always* denotes sexual intercourse" (emphasis mine). Cooper further notes that all the other elements mentioned in the dream passages "are realized literally," and so the references to lovemaking "cannot just be dismissed [as Lambert has suggested] as 'symbolism.'" ¹¹⁰

It is moreover the case that Nissinen, although he disputes Kilmer's sexualized interpretation of the dream accounts' *ḥaššinnu(m)/assinnu(m)* wordplay, lets pass without challenge the eroticized and sexualized readings Kilmer and Dalley have offered of the *kišru/kezru* and *zikru/zikaru/sekru* puns, although he is clearly aware of them.¹¹¹ Presumably this is because Nissinen acknowledges these puns' sexualized connotations. Nissinen further admits that "erotic associations" are suggested by the text's descriptions of Gilgamesh declining Ishtar's proposal of marriage, which "appears as an alternative to Gilgameš's [Gilgamesh's] relationship with Enkidu," and by Gilgamesh's covering the dead Enkidu's face "like a bride." Even as Nissinen insists, in other words, that the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu "exemplifies less a homoerotic than a homosocial type of bonding," he still grants that "the relationship between Gilgameš [Gilgamesh] and Enkidu is described as most intimate" and does have a "homoerotic aspect."¹¹²

Likewise, Foster, even while claiming that the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu "has no sexual basis at all,"¹¹³ appears to acknowledge that erotic and sexual imagery is used, especially early on in the Epic, to describe Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's interactions: he cites articles by William L. Moran and by Cooper, for example, that

indicate that the verb *ḫabābu*, “to caress,” should be understood in a sexual sense.¹¹⁴ Leick somewhat similarly, despite proposing there is a “sublimation of erotic energy” when Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet and that they “transcend sensuality” as they go off to engage in their first great adventure, the fight against Huwawa/Humbaba, speaks of Enkidu’s “virility,” of Gilgamesh’s “unabated” vigor and “boundless” libido, and even of a possible last night of “sexual passion” between the two heroes before Enkidu is decreed for death. She writes as well of “the strong erotic feelings” that both the meteor and the axe of which he dreams arouse in Gilgamesh, and, as I have mentioned above, Leick also identifies several sexualized euphemisms that may be present in the wrestling-match scene: the fact that the combat itself “could be seen as a euphemistic description of a different sort of wrestling” and the potentially euphemistic references to “the ‘foot’” with which Enkidu blocks Gilgamesh’s way and the “sudden ‘weakness’ that gives way to tenderness.” “Love and erotic attraction play a significant part,” Leick concludes, in describing Enkidu’s role as a match for Gilgamesh, even though she maintains Enkidu’s “destiny to complement Gilgameš [Gilgamesh] ... is not directed towards ... sensual fulfillment in the arms of his friend.”¹¹⁵

Halperin, too, although beginning his essay on the ancient world’s heroic relationships by deriding the “insidious temptation to sexualize the erotics of male friendship,” allows in this same piece that Gilgamesh’s affections for Enkidu are “described in terms appropriate for relations ... with objects of sexual desire.” He cites specifically the descriptions of Gilgamesh “loving” Enkidu “like a wife” and “caressing” him in the various Old Babylonian and Standard version dream accounts and Gilgamesh mourning over Enkidu “like a widow” and veiling his corpse “as if it were a bride.”¹¹⁶ Even the circumspect A. Leo Oppenheim concedes, “it can hardly be denied that an erotic interest is permitted to affect the friendship of the two heroes of the epic.”¹¹⁷

In fact, among them, the various commentators who argue for a non-sexualized interpretation of the Gilgamesh-Enkidu relationship nevertheless affirm—at least in part—six of the eleven potential examples of the Epic’s homoeroticized imagery that I explored in the previous section of this chapter: 1. the lines in the Old Babylonian and Standard version dream accounts that describe Gilgamesh as “caressing” (*ḫabābu*) and “loving” (*rāmu*) the metaphorical Enkidu “like a wife” (*kī aššate*); 2. the wordplay *kišru/kezru* found in the Standard version’s meteor-dream account; 3. the wordplay *zikru/zikaru/sekru* found in the Standard version’s account of the creation of Enkidu; 4. various euphemistic references to sexual intercourse that are found in the wrestling-match scene in the Old Babylonian tradition (and, in

fragmentary form, in the Standard version); 5. the lines in the Standard version's deathbed scene in which Gilgamesh covers the face of the dead Enkidu "like a bride" and then mourns like a bereaved spouse; and 6. the scene in Tablet VI of the Standard version in which Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar's advances.

None of the various commentators, moreover, who have argued for a nonsexualized interpretation of the Gilgamesh-Enkidu relationship has been able to venture what I find a satisfactory explanation for this homoerotic imagery that they all admit is found, at least to some degree, in the epic tradition. Halperin, for example, accounts for the Epic's homoeroticized and sexualized imagery by proposing that friendship generally, and more specifically the type of heroic friendship he believes is manifest by Gilgamesh and Enkidu, is, in Halperin's words, an "*anomalous* relationship," one that "exists outside the more thoroughly codified social networks formed by kinship and sexual ties," at least in most Western cultures and, Halperin suggests, in the ancient Near East as well.¹¹⁸ Consequently, he proposes, the narrators of the Epic of Gilgamesh must appeal to the language of the more established "conjugal relations and kinship relations in order to define, to make familiar, and to situate (both socially and emotionally) the central friendship they wish to explore."¹¹⁹ According to Halperin, that is, any erotic and sexual imagery found in the Gilgamesh Epic is invoked only to help represent a noneroticized and nonsexual friendship for which there is otherwise no descriptive imagery available. He argues too that the Epic's representation of the Gilgamesh-Enkidu friendship is meant to "image," as he puts it "the larger bonds of human sociality,"¹²⁰ "Enkidu's friendship afford[ing] Gilgamesh a proleptic taste of the pleasures of human sociality, including marriage and paternity, with which he will be invited to console himself by the ale-wife [Siduri] after Enkidu's death."¹²¹

Yet, as Walls points out, the specifics of this "Enkidu's friendship as proleptic" interpretation fail in respect to, at least, the Standard version of the Gilgamesh Epic, in which the speech by Siduri that Halperin takes to be so crucial is omitted. Walls further suggests, contra Halperin, that, even in the Standard version, Gilgamesh's relationship with Enkidu "competes with, rather than points toward, responsibility to family and society."¹²² It in addition seems to me that Halperin's more general argument, that the epic tradition is forced to use the more familiar language of sex, and also kinship, to describe the otherwise anomalous relationship of friendship, could just as easily go the other way, as it appears to be only Halperin's intuition that *friendship* is the more appropriate term for categorizing Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship that leads him to read the Epic's eroticized and sexualized references as metaphorical rather than actual. An interpreter with a

different intuition, however (a Jacobsen, say, or a Kilmer), could just as easily argue for a literal reading as opposed to symbolic. One has to raise with Halperin as well, I believe, the question of reception, for even if we were to grant that Halperin correctly describes Gilgamesh's ancient narrators as using the language of sexual relations to explore a friendship relationship they otherwise lacked the words to depict, can we assume these narrators' ancient audiences would have grasped this rather subtle point and understood that the text's eroticized and sexualized language and imagery were directed toward promoting only a construction of heroic friendship? Or would they more likely have heard multiple instances of language and imagery that suggested to them actual erotic and sexual interactions? Or, at a minimum, would they have heard language and imagery that suggested ambiguity, erotic and sexual interplay even within Halperin's proposed context of friendship?

I also find myself unpersuaded by Nissinen's explanation for the text's use of eroticized language despite the fact that, according to Nissinen, the Gilgamesh-Enkidu relationship is not to be read in sexual terms. Nissinen follows Leick in identifying the central ideological concern of the Gilgamesh Epic as a critical examination of "the traditional values of the Sumerian city, as the embodiment of civilization."¹²³ For both Nissinen and Leick, moreover, the Epic's descriptions of the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu work in service of this critical examination by juxtaposing the "lavish and sex-hungry city culture," which is represented in this interpretation, at least initially, by Gilgamesh, with its alternative, the "wild and ascetic" rural world, which is represented by Enkidu.¹²⁴ Both Nissinen and Leick further agree that the result of the Epic's juxtaposition of these two antithetical models is a rejection of the sexually insatiable culture that urbanization represents in favor of a rural aesthetic that "transcends sexuality";¹²⁵ this is symbolized, at the end of the Epic, by the transformed Gilgamesh, who has left behind the city but, more important, has left behind the reckless sexual expressions earlier manifested by his urban self: his "rend[ing of] young men from their fathers and young women from their husbands" in Tablet I and his "act[ing] on his right to sleep with the bride on the wedding night before the groom does so" in Tablet II.¹²⁶ These are replaced, according to Nissinen (footnoting Leick), by "an accentuated masculine asceticism."¹²⁷

Nissinen then argues that the erotic imagery that is used to describe the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu—in, for example, the Standard version's accounts of the meteor and axe dreams; in Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar, in favor of, as Nissinen sees it, his friendship with Enkidu; and in Gilgamesh's covering of Enkidu "like a

bride” after his death—is central to the Epic’s argument about its preference for the rural aesthetic over the urban, in that the eroticism serves “as the impetus to the transformation which leads first from savage sexual behavior [i.e., from the urban] to mutual love, and finally away from physical sex [i.e., to the rural].” More specifically, he writes:¹²⁸

At the beginning, there is plenty of sex in the lives of Gilgameš [Gilgamesh] and Enkidu, but this lifestyle is presented as primitive and reckless. Already the dream of Gilgameš [Gilgamesh] brings a new, formerly unknown tone to his sexual fantasies: loving tenderness. As the story proceeds, the relationship between Gilgameš [Gilgamesh] and Enkidu deepens and, simultaneously, the sexual passions seem to subside to the point that one can speak of a ‘spiritual’ love between the two men.

As I have already indicated, however, this analysis, both in its general claims and its specific analysis of the Epic’s eroticism, strikes me as problematic. In terms of its general claims I find it problematic to suggest that the Epic intends to call into question the “values of the Sumerian city, as the embodiment of civilization.”¹²⁹ Along with most commentators, I would have said just the opposite: that the Epic intends to celebrate the “advantages of civilized life.”¹³⁰ Both Nissinen and Leick, indeed, are curiously silent about the end of the Standard version’s Tablet XI and its description of Gilgamesh’s return to the city of Uruk and his finding of “peace” (*pašāḫu*; Tablet I, line 7) within this urban environment. He finds peace there, moreover, precisely *because* of the great physical monuments of urbanization that are sited in Uruk’s midst (its walls and its Ishtar temple).¹³¹ I further find it odd to describe the countryside as the representative site of asceticism, given that some of the most fervent sexual activity of the Epic—Enkidu’s six days and seven nights of coupling with Shamhat—takes place there. As for Nissinen’s specific analysis of the Epic’s homoerotic imagery, I would ask why eroticism, of all things, would function in the way he describes, as the impetus that moves the action away “from savage sexual behavior” to, ultimately, an end of sexual passion. More logically I might have expected just the opposite: that the erotic would facilitate sexual intimacy, or at least a certain kind of sexual intimacy, not preclude it.¹³²

But an interpretation of the Gilgamesh Epic that looks toward sexual intimacy brings us immediately back to what I described above as the problem I would see as the most significant for those who would advocate an eroticized or sexualized interpretation of the Epic: how can a text that depicts the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu

in terms that all commentators admit are, at least to some degree, homoerotic, also be a text in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu are represented as equals, given that an egalitarian sexual relationship is not conceivable within the cultural context in which the Gilgamesh Epic was generated? Yet what might happen if we were to turn this dilemma on its head, so that, rather than letting ourselves be stymied by the Epic's failure to conform to the ways in which we would expect homoerotic imagery to be deployed in Mesopotamian tradition, we were to embrace the Epic's non-normativity and ask ourselves whether there are situations in which its eroticized and sexualized language and images, although they seem so inappropriate within the Mesopotamian context, might in fact be acceptable and even expected? My answer to this question, as I will discuss in the chapter that follows, is yes: that in the work that has been done by anthropologists of religion on the phenomenon known as rites of passage, and more specifically in the work that has been done on the use of the rites-of-passage structure within religious narrative, we can find a compelling explanation for the Gilgamesh Epic's use of homoerotic imagery.

THE LIMINAL HERO, PART 1



When the French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep published his groundbreaking study *Rites de passage* in 1909, his intent was primarily to define a tripartite structure that van Gennep argued was characteristic of birth rites, puberty rites, marital rites, death rites, and, indeed, “rites which accompany every change of state, place, social position and age” across cultures.¹ According to van Gennep, the three parts of these various rites of passage were 1. separation, in which “a person or group becomes detached from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from an earlier set of social conditions”; 2. margin or *limen* (from the Latin meaning “threshold”), “when the state of the ritual subject is ambiguous; he is no longer in the old state and has not yet reached the new one”; and 3. reaggregation or reincorporation, “when the ritual subject enters a new stable state with its own rights and obligations.”² For example, in Hopi childbirth rites as reported by van Gennep, the pregnant woman, while attended by her mother during labor, is isolated (or separated) at the moment of delivery itself, during which no one is allowed to be present. After the child arrives, the new mother is rejoined by her family members, but she remains otherwise detached from her larger community, proscribed from leaving her house before sundown and subject to dietary restrictions. Then, on the twentieth day after the birth, this transitional (or liminal) period ends when the new child is named and a special ritual meal is served to the entire community. “From that day [of reincorporation] on,” van Gennep writes, “everything in the house goes its usual way for the mother, the child, the family, and the pueblo.”³

Yet even while focusing primarily on these sorts of life-cycle rituals, van Gennep proposed that his tripartite model of separation-liminality-reincorporation could be applied to the cross-cultural analysis of rituals other than those having to do with the human life cycle, rituals related to seasonal and calendrical change, for instance (first fruits, harvest, new year, new moon, solstice, etc.).⁴ Subsequent scholars, pushing further, suggested that van Gennep’s rites-of-passage model might apply to elements within religious systems beyond those in which ritual

is an overt concern. Thus, in his 1954 book *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, the Romanian-born historian of religion Mircea Eliade argued that, because it is “a consecration, an initiation,” a movement from “the profane to the sacred,” any journey to the “center” is a rite of passage, whether that journey be a pilgrimage to a sacred place (Mecca, Hardwar, Jerusalem), a heroic expedition in search of some legendary object (the Golden Fleece, the Golden Apples, the Herb of Life), or a quest for “self,” for the center of one’s being.⁵ Eliade’s sense that the rites-of-passage model helps structure stories of heroic adventure is found as well in Joseph Campbell’s 1949 publication *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he writes, “The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation-initiation-return*.” A hero’s story begins, as Campbell sees it, with the hero venturing forth, or separating himself, “from the world of the common day,” then continues by describing the “region of supernatural wonder” to which he comes.⁶ There, he undertakes “mysterious and threatening adventures that lead to the wresting of a boon or prize from powerful authorities,” after which he returns and presents this boon or prize to his community.⁷

Both Eliade’s and Campbell’s appropriations of van Gennep’s rites-of-passage pattern, however, have serious flaws, especially Campbell’s, as he imprecisely and uncritically lumps together what the critic H. A. Reinhold describes as “vague and shadowy parallels” from hero stories across the world to yield what Campbell identifies as a universal “monomyth.”⁸ The subject of this monomyth, Campbell goes on to argue, is the hero’s quest for self-discovery with the goal of self-transcendence, or the awakening of the psychic awareness of the heroic soul to the hero’s own identity and, moreover, to the “at-oneness” or essential unity of all beings and things. In fact, Campbell so emphasizes the centrality of this awakening motif in hero stories as he understands them that, while otherwise grounding his interpretations in van Gennep’s rites-of-passage paradigm, he changes one of the central terms van Gennep used to define the rites-of passage structure, so that, for Campbell, van Gennep’s transitional or liminal phase becomes a phase of initiation, a period in which the hero apprehends theretofore unknown mysteries about himself and the larger mysteries of the cosmos. Mary R. Lefkowitz, however, astutely suggests that this stress on initiation in Campbell’s analysis, derived as it is from the arguably romanticized and even mystically described theories of Carl G. Jung, is more about our Freudian- and Jungian-influenced worldview than it is about the hero stories of the premodern world that Campbell ostensibly seeks to explain: “only a hero in the twentieth century,” Lefkowitz rather scathingly observes, “would set off

on a journey with the goal of discovering himself.”⁹ Florence Sandler and Darrell Reeck similarly, although somewhat less pointedly, comment that “what appears to be going on in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is ... [the] conversion [of hero myths] from one cultural viewpoint to another,” from these myths’ original context, in which the hero was a “Doer” (for example, a Heracles required to perform twelve superhuman labors), to a twentieth-century context, in which the hero is a “Knower” (for example, a Luke Skywalker, who must learn to feel the “Force” flowing through him).¹⁰ Charles H. Long raises kindred concerns about ahistoric tendencies that compromise Eliade’s work,¹¹ as does Wendy Doniger regarding Eliade’s Jungian attempts to develop a universalistic theory of myth that neglects the particularities of the stories’ geographical and cultural settings.¹²

Thus, for a more successful as well as a more thorough attempt to apply van Gennep’s rites-of-passage model beyond the confines of that which is explicitly ritual, we turn to the work of the Scottish-born anthropologist and theorist of religion Victor Turner and of his followers. We will be particularly interested in the ways in which Turner and his followers came to apply Turner’s understanding of the liminal phase of van Gennep’s rites-of-passage model to an analysis of certain types of religious narratives. In this chapter’s first section I will describe this aspect of Turner’s work. In section 2 I will offer my own understanding of how Turner’s insights might help illuminate the homoeroticized imagery of the Epic of Gilgamesh.¹³

Victor Turner on Rites of Passage

To be sure, Turner, like van Gennep, began his career by seeking to describe not religious narrative but ritual, especially the rituals of the Ndembu of northwestern Zambia, a tribe of about seven thousand people among whom Turner did his primary field work in the first half of the 1950s. Turner argued that within Ndembu society “conflict was rife” and “manifested itself in public episodes of tensional irruption I called ‘social dramas.’” These social dramas, Turner went on to propose, were highly structured events comprised of four parts: 1. an initial “breach of regular, norm-governed social relations,” 2. a “phase of mounting crisis,” 3. an attempt at “redressive action” (which, if unsuccessful, could be followed by a return to the crisis stage and then further attempts at redress), and 4. either “the *reintegration* of the disturbed social group or ... the social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between the contesting parties.”¹⁴ Ndembu rituals, according to Turner, stood in a close and even dialectical relationship to these social dramas: first, because the rituals were often performed

during the third stage of a social drama as a potential means of bringing about the desired redress; second, and more important, because part of the redressive strategy these rituals employed was to represent, in multivocal and multivalent ways, the stresses that underlay the social drama. As Turner writes, "Both in its plot and in its symbolism, a ritual is an epitome of the wider and spontaneous social processes in which it is embodied and which ideally it controls."¹⁵

Turner then went on to describe just how, in his view, Ndembu rituals helped control and resolve the social dramas they epitomized: that because of the reference the rituals made to the cosmological and supernatural (or, more precisely for Turner, because of the reference the rituals' *symbols* made to the cosmological and supernatural), they could depict the social dramas' conflicts in a way that reminded the Ndembu community of, and reoriented them toward, their shared transcendental values. By so doing, they evoked a transformative process that "promote[d] reunification"¹⁶ and recreated order in the lives of the rituals' participants. In developing further this analysis, as Turner himself writes, "It was not long before I began to look for comparable data in other societies, for I was convinced that each society had its own variant of the social drama form."¹⁷ That is, what was originally for Turner an attempt to describe Ndembu social processes and their relationship to Ndembu ritual developed into an overarching and highly influential theory of social process and ritual across cultures.

As commentators have often pointed out, Turner's cross-cultural convictions regarding his four-part social drama form and its associated rituals, and especially Turner's convictions (contrary to the prevailing structural-functionalist anthropological view of his day) regarding the "underlying temporal structure within social processes," are highly reminiscent of van Gennep's convictions regarding his tripartite and cross-cultural rites-of-passage model,¹⁸ so much so that after Turner first read van Gennep (in the early 1960s, shortly after *Rites de passage* was translated into English),¹⁹ he began to suggest that rituals had the same sort of essentially "diachronic profile" or dynamic, processual character as the social dramas he felt they epitomized.²⁰ "Not only," that is, "is ritual situated within a process of social drama; ritual itself is processual in form."²¹ Turner, moreover, readily began to use van Gennep's description of the tripartite structure of rites of passage to discuss the processual structure he now ascribed to rituals (and to all rituals, it is important to note, not just the sort of life-cycle and related rituals on which van Gennep had focused). In particular, the liminal phase of van Gennep's model, theretofore barely discussed among scholars, became the object of Turner's intense interest.²² Liminality is thus the topic of the first essay Turner published

after reading van Gennep ("Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*"), and a chapter on liminality stands at the core of Turner's monumental *The Ritual Process*, the 1969 publication of the Lewis Henry Morgan lectures that Turner delivered at the University of Rochester in 1966.²³ In addition, in an autobiographical essay published in 1977, Turner speaks of how critical a theoretical tool van Gennep's concept of liminality became to him after he first came across it in the 1960s: "The present author [that is, Turner], stimulated during his fieldwork by Henri Junod's use of van Gennep's interpretive apparatus for understanding Thonga ritual ... came to see that the liminal stage was of crucial importance with regard to this process of regenerative renewal." "Indeed," Turner continues, "van Gennep sometimes called the three stages 'preliminal, liminal, and postliminal,' indicating that importance."²⁴

Unlike van Gennep, however, Turner, because he understood ritual in relation to social *drama*, always saw ritual as a *text*, as a performance that is not just instrumental, directed toward a purpose such as, say, moving an individual from one stage of life and/or one status to another, but that is also expressive: according to Turner, that is, ritual "does not simply do something but says something."²⁵ More specifically, as I have already suggested regarding Turner's analysis of Ndembu ritual, Turner regarded ritual as a process of communication that serves "the highly important functions ... of storing and transmitting information,"²⁶ in particular information that concerns "the gods or ancestors or daimones" and that more generally addresses matters of cosmological and supernatural importance.²⁷ As such, it is "information that is regarded as authoritative, even as ultimately valid, axiomatic" within a society. As Turner goes on to say:²⁸

We are not dealing with information about a new agricultural technique or a better judicial procedure. We are concerned here with the crucial values of a believing community, whether it is a religious community, a nation, a tribe, a secret society, or any other type of group whose ultimate unity resides in its orientation towards transcendental and invisible powers.

The information ritual conveys, in short, is information about religion. Robert A. Segal has pointed out, moreover, that, while it may have been commonplace among Turner's contemporaries in the 1960s to regard *myth* as a conveyor of religious information, regarding ritual, it was not.²⁹ Yet from such a conviction that ritual does the same sort of communicative work as does myth, it was only a very short step for Turner to reach the conclusion that myths, as well as similar sorts of religious narratives—sagas, legends, and epics—might be analyzed

according to some of the same strategies that he had developed regarding rituals.

In a 1971 article, for example, Turner reflects back on what he describes as the passion of his undergraduate days, the period of the Icelandic Commonwealth (ca. 874–1262 CE) and the thirteenth-century sagas that claimed to recount the Commonwealth's history, in order to argue that these sagas might epitomize social dramas in the same sorts of ways Turner believed social dramas were epitomized in ritual. Indeed, in Turner's words, the Icelandic sagas are "*nothing but* connected sequences of social dramas" (emphasis mine).³⁰ For example, regarding one of these stories, "The Story of Burnt Njal" or "Njal's Saga," Turner writes:³¹

Njal's Saga begins with simple breaches of order, minor crises, and informal redress ... which cumulate, despite temporary settlement and redress, until finally the "breach" is the killing of a *goði* [a chieftain-priest] who is also a good man, the "crisis" involves a major cleavage of factions consisting of the major lineages and *sibs* [kin groups] in southern and south-eastern Iceland, and the parties seek "redress" at the *Althing* [a general assembly of Icelanders, especially of the Icelandic aristocracy] and Fifth Court [a legal institution created by Njal and convened at the *Althing*].

A decade later Turner presented this same sort of argument about narratives and social drama, but in a more sweeping fashion, in his essay "Social Dramas and the Stories About Them." There he explicitly compares the roots he feels both ritual and narrative have in the social drama. As he writes, "The social drama, then, I regard as the experiential matrix from which the many genres of cultural performance, beginning with redressive ritual and juridical procedures and eventually including oral and literary narrative, have been generated."³²

Moreover, as Turner had come to focus, in his studies on social drama, on the liminal phase of the rituals he felt were embedded within the dramas and were the epitome of them, so too, in his analysis of certain narratives as epitomes of social drama, does he come to focus on representations of liminality he feels are embedded in these texts. Not surprisingly, Turner concluded that in the same way that rituals, and thus ritual expressions of liminality, most typically manifest themselves during the third or redressive phases of social dramas, it was during the redressive phases of narratives structured according to the social drama pattern that liminal characteristics and liminal symbolism most commonly occurred. In the second section of this chapter I will discuss more thoroughly what Turner means when he

speaks of liminal characteristics and liminal symbolism, but here suffice it to say that Turner understands the redressive phases of social drama narratives to be liminal because these narrative moments are characterized by the same sort of ambiguity that van Gennep described as intrinsic to the liminal stage of a rite of passage. Especially, according to Turner, these narrative moments are characterized by a certain quality of existing betwixt and between normative social structures. In a second paper Turner wrote on the representations of social dramas in Icelandic sagas, for example, he describes these narratives' depictions of the annual convocations of the *Althing* assembly as liminal in character because there "narrow localized ties" were transcended.³³ Most important, otherwise normative clan loyalties and tribal affiliations were temporarily dissolved, so that a space was created in which family feuds, the "crises" Turner sees as dominating in the saga literature (see, for example, his description above of "Njal's Saga"), could be addressed and, potentially, resolved.³⁴

For our purposes, an even more significant attempt at this sort of analysis is found in Turner's 1968 article "Myth and Symbol," in which Turner considers the role of liminal imagery and symbolism in narratives more explicitly religious than the quasi-historical Icelandic sagas. He argues in this essay that liminality is not just a feature of but is essential to his understanding of myths, which Turner defines, following the folklorist Stith Thompson, as "sacred narratives telling 'of sacred beings and semidivine heroes and of the origins of all things, usually through the agency of these sacred beings.'" Such sacred narratives about divine beings or semidivine heroes are, Turner writes, "*liminal phenomena*," by which he means, first, that these sacred narratives are often told at a time or in a site that is part of the liminal phase of some rite of passage. More notable for us, however, is Turner's proposal that myths, "even where ... not bound to rites ... have a liminal character ... liminal symbolism ... abounds." Myths thus depict times and places that, as above, exist betwixt and between normative social structures, times and places in which otherwise inviolable boundaries can be crossed and otherwise inviolable customs and conventions can be ignored. In Turner's words, myths are

felt to be high or deep mysteries which put the initiand temporarily into close rapport with the primary or primordial generative powers of the cosmos, the acts of which transcend rather than transgress the norms of human secular society. In myth is a limitless freedom, a symbolic freedom of action which is denied to the norm-bound incumbent of a status in a social structure.

As such, myths, Turner concludes, “represent a return to ... a legitimated situation of freedom from cultural constraints and social classifications.... At the root of the rational is the non-rational, which gives it its meaning, and liminality is that root.”³⁵



Victor Turner died in 1983, but still today, a little more than two decades after his death, his work on the rites-of-passage structure and on liminality remains incredibly influential, cited with almost astonishing frequency by scholars of religion.³⁶ In the main these scholars have affirmed many of Turner’s basic conclusions. Of course, some concerns have been raised,³⁷ most notably, perhaps, about the attempts Turner made in the latter part of his career to locate a modified and somewhat debased analog of the category of liminality he had described for traditional societies within the modern industrial and postindustrial worlds in which he and his readers both lived. According to Turner, within this modern analog of liminality, which Turner called the “liminoid,” the “leisure genres of art and entertainment” correspond to “the rituals and myths of archaic, tribal and early agrarian cultures.”³⁸ Yet as many commentators have pointed out, Turner so stretches the parameters of what is liminal here that the concept begins to lose all its meaning, especially its meaning as it pertains to the study of religion. Scholars have also rightly criticized the ways in which Turner’s descriptions of liminality, even as located within traditional societies, became more and more idealized in his later writings, thus obscuring (as discussed further below) how challenging and indeed quite terrifying aspects of the liminal experience can be. Michael Taussig writes, for example, of how liminality in the later Turner, “became increasingly balmy and innocent, with erotic, obscene, sadistic, cruel, and licentious features bleached out.”³⁹

There are aspects of Turner’s earlier descriptions of liminality, too, that are open to criticism. At several points in his writings, for instance, Turner seeks to illustrate what he means by liminal ambiguity by citing examples of specific symbols in which he feels the ambiguous aspects of liminality are especially apparent. Yet while we might agree that some of Turner’s specific examples can represent liminal ambiguity across all cultures (solar and lunar eclipses and theriomorphic creatures such as mermaids and centaurs are two examples of Turner’s that come to mind), other symbols Turner proposed as universally representing liminality may be less applicable cross-culturally. Androgyny, although one of the symbols that Turner claims

cultures most often use to express liminality's ambiguous qualities,⁴⁰ may in fact be a symbol that can be used to express liminal ambiguity *only* in cultures in which a clear sense of sexual dimorphism is present.⁴¹ Bisexuality is another symbol that Turner suggests is often used across cultures to represent liminality's ambiguity,⁴² yet as I have intimated in [chapter 1](#), bisexuality, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, is a category that belongs only to our (and Turner's) nineteenth- and twentieth-century Euro-American environment. It therefore cannot—contra Turner's impulse—be applied transhistorically and transculturally as a symbol of liminality.

Within Turner's attempts to locate a rites-of-passage structure and liminality in religious narratives, too, we can note some dangerous universalizing tendencies. Even though Turner, for example, is a far more sensitive and discerning interpreter of religious literature than are Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, whom I discussed above, it is nevertheless the case that Turner was given, as were Eliade and Campbell, to making statements about narrative patternings across cultures that failed to treat seriously the distinctive features of individual texts and/or particular narrative genres. Caroline Walker Bynum has brilliantly demonstrated with regard to medieval hagiography, for instance, that despite Turner's desire to claim that the rites-of-passage pattern is used ubiquitously within religious narratives, it is only *male* biographers who incorporate liminal imagery in their accounts of saints' lives from the European Middle Ages, whether these accounts be of the lives of male saints or of female. Women saints who tell their own life stories, however, do not typically do so in terms of liminal imagery nor, more generally, in terms of Turner's processual model of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration.⁴³

Still, the fact that Turner can be faulted for attempting to apply too universally certain symbols of liminality and a rites-of-passage narrative pattern does not mean that his overall understandings of liminality and of the liminal aspects of certain religious narratives are without merit. In fact, even Bynum, although raising important questions about using the rites-of-passage structure and concepts of liminality to analyze stories told by women,⁴⁴ admits that she finds both Turner's "specific and general insights ... useful for understanding male stories."⁴⁵ Other religion scholars agree. Alison Goddard Elliott has argued, for example, that a rites-of-passage pattern structures the hagiographies of many of Christianity's first-millennium male saints,⁴⁶ and Andre' Droogers has likewise proposed that the rites-of-passage pattern manifests itself cross-culturally and across the centuries in the biographies of six male religious leaders (1. Jesus, 2. the medieval merchant-cum-mendicant and lay preacher Waldes, 3. the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, 4. a Zaire prophet, Kimbangu, 5.

the Buddha, 6. Mohammed).⁴⁷

Both Elliott and Droogers, moreover, draw fruitfully on Turner's discussion of liminality to explore various aspects of their subjects' life stories. Indeed, Elliott entitles one of the chapters of her book-length study "The Saint as Liminal Hero" and cites in it, among other arguments, Turner's observations regarding liminality's dissolution of "status in a social structure," along with his argument that when the statusless liminal person "ceases to be a master and becomes the equal or fellow of man, he also ... becomes the equal or fellow of nonhuman beings," in order to illuminate the fact that the saints on whom she focuses, who lived otherwise solitary existences in the desert, were often said to enjoy a peaceful communion with both animals and angels.⁴⁸ Similarly Droogers, who explicitly describes himself as "follow[ing] the path paved by Turner," catalogs several symbols he defines as marginal or transitional, or what Turner would call liminal, that recur in the religious biographies he examines: existence within the world of nature (versus culture), traveling and provisional lodging (versus sedentary life), nonviolence (versus violence), absence of distinctions in rank (versus hierarchy), anonymity and humility (versus name and fame), isolation and seclusion (versus life in the heart of society), hardship and ordeal (versus comfort), dirt (versus purity), poverty and begging (versus wealth), and fasting (versus eating).⁴⁹

Droogers furthermore suggests that while some of the liminal or marginal symbols he finds in the stories of religious leaders he studies may have their basis in fact, the symbols are often "of an artificial, constructed nature"; that is, the biographers of religious leaders often shape their subjects' stories in a way that *deliberately* incorporates and even exploits marginal or liminal imagery.⁵⁰ Elliott makes basically the same point about her saints' hagiographers.⁵¹ This is not to say, of course, that either Droogers or Elliot wishes to claim that the biographers and hagiographers about whom they write had anticipated by centuries Turner's theoretical insights and thus were seeking to apply some theory of liminality or, worse, some checklist of liminal motifs mechanically and even unimaginatively to their narratives. Instead, their claim, as Droogers particularly indicates, is that certain religious figures rather naturally seem to have their life stories told using what Turner has taught us to describe as liminal motifs and liminal imagery because these figures are understood by their biographers to have lived, at a minimum, unconventionally and even, in more maximal cases, on the extreme margins of society. Hence the language and imagery of unconventionality and even extreme marginality—which is to say, according to Turner's framework, the language and imagery of liminality—are well appropriated into the

narratives about them.

The biographers of the ancient Israelites (in other words, the biblical writers) likewise perceived their subjects to have lived a life on the margins, and this is especially true of the ancient Israelites as depicted in the stories that purport to present the earliest days of their existence, the stories found, say, in the Bible's first six books (Genesis-Joshua), which portray the Israelites as, first, itinerant shepherds, then as slaves, and next as peripatetic wanderers in the wilderness, before finally describing them as establishing themselves as a politically and religiously united confederation within the "promised land." Within these stories of marginal existence, Elliott's and Droogers's analysis would lead us to predict, we might well expect to find a superabundance of the motifs of marginality, or, to use Turner's terminology, a superabundance of the motifs of liminality. It should therefore come as no surprise that many biblical scholars have commented on the presence of liminal features and more generally a rites-of-passage pattern in the Genesis-Deuteronomy narratives.

Edmund Leach, for example, cites Turner in an essay addressing a question raised by the book of Exodus, "Why Did Moses Have a Sister?" that is published in the volume *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*,⁵² and in an article in the same book D. Alan Aycok argues that the story of Abraham's nephew Lot in Genesis 19 should be read as a "metaphoric rite of passage," a journey from an old (and urban) society (Sodom) to a new (and rural) one, a cave in the hills above Zoar.⁵³ Ronald Hendel similarly comments on the Exodus 2 birth story of Moses as a rite of passage, in which Moses is a character "born a slave, the son of Hebrews, who gains a new status as a free person as a result of his passage into and deliverance from the Nile."⁵⁴ More notably, however, Hendel pushes beyond a rites-of-passage analysis that focuses on the story of Moses as an individual in order to see the entire Exodus story of the Israelite people, and especially that story's description of the people's transformational journey from Egypt to the land of Canaan, as an exemplar of Turner's rites-of-passage model,⁵⁵ as has also been suggested by Alfred Haldar, Shemaryahu Talmon, Robert L. Cohn, and William H. C. Propp.⁵⁶ All these scholars have focused in particular on what they describe as the liminal qualities of Israel's wilderness experiences: for example, the aimlessness (or ambiguity) of the people's forty years of wandering betwixt and between the land of slavery out of which they have come and the "promised land" to which they are headed.

Gilgamesh, too, is a figure who spends a prolonged period wandering in the wilderness (the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablets IX–XI) and a figure who more generally is portrayed within ancient Mesopotamian tradition as having lived, at a minimum,

unconventionally, and even, especially during his wilderness wanderings, on the extreme margins of society. Thus it should once more come as no surprise that a number of scholars of the ancient Near East have discussed rites-of-passage imagery in relation to his story. William L. Moran, for example, has described the Old Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh Epic as a “long narrative [that] seems to pivot on three seven-day periods, each of which is associated with a profound transformation.”⁵⁷ The first transformation, according to Moran, is that of Enkidu, who is transformed from nonhuman into human through his six days and seven nights of lovemaking with the prostitute Shamhat. The second is the transformation of Gilgamesh, who, after mourning over Enkidu’s death for six days and seven nights, leaves behind Uruk and the heroic life to become an antihero and, indeed, an antihuman as he dons animal skins and wanders, like a beast, upon the steppe. Only after failing the test set by Utnapishtim to stay awake for six days and seven nights does Gilgamesh reembrace his human nature, leaving behind his animal skins, his animal-like wandering of the steppe, and his fruitless quest for eternal life.⁵⁸

As Moran notes, all these transformations “are associated with corresponding rites of passage, especially cleansing and clothing”: subsequent to Enkidu’s weeklong intercourse with Shamhat, he is anointed and clothed in human garb; when Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh refuses to wash, to don fresh clothes, or otherwise to halt the grieving process at the end of the seven days of mourning that is prescribed by Mesopotamian tradition; after Gilgamesh fails Utnapishtim’s weeklong test, he changes out of the animal skins he has been wearing and allows himself to be bathed.⁵⁹ But while Moran is surely correct in finding rites-of-passage imagery and the rites-of-passage pattern in these three moments in the narrative, he does not exploit his own observations in order to suggest, as I will propose below, that the entire Gilgamesh Epic might be read according to a rites-of-passage analysis. Gary A. Anderson comes closer to such an understanding, suggesting that Gilgamesh’s rituals of mourning after Enkidu dies in Tablet VII only begin the liminal phase of a rite of passage that will not be completed until Gilgamesh realizes the truth of the lesson, according to the Old Babylonian version, the alewife Siduri tries to teach him—that “the only life he can attain is a life lived within the human community”—and as a result of this realization leaves his mourning behaviors behind and rejoins (or in van Gennep’s language, is reaggregated or reincorporated into) normal human society.⁶⁰ Tzvi Abusch goes a degree further by proposing that a rites-of-passage model structures Tablets VII–XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh and is also found in the scene of Ishtar’s propositioning of Gilgamesh that occurs

in Tablet VI,⁶¹ and Rivkah Harris somewhat similarly reads the story of the wilderness journey in Tablets IX–XI (and also the story of Enkidu's descent into the netherworld in Tablet XII) as a tale of “symbolic initiation” whereby “Gilgamesh ‘dies’ to one state of his life and is ‘reborn’ to another,” “a metaphorical rite of passage that marks Gilgamesh’s transition from childhood to adulthood.”⁶² Sara Mandell, in her essay “Liminality, Altered States, and the *Gilgamesh Epic*,” pushes further still, taking on the entire narrative in order to suggest its depictions of Gilgamesh and Enkidu are filled with liminal markers.

As I have intimated already, I agree with Mandell, as opposed to the more circumscribed interpretations of Moran, Anderson, Abusch, and Harris, that we should see rites-of-passage imagery as structuring the entire Gilgamesh narrative. Nevertheless, I find Mandell’s execution of her project seriously flawed, as she is dependent on Joseph Campbell’s understanding of hero narratives and thus replicates, in my opinion, many of the methodological flaws of Campbell’s that I described at the beginning of this chapter. For example, as Campbell is wont to do, Mandell seems to impose a somewhat different story on the text than the one we actually have. Lefkowitz points out about Campbell his statement that, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus was sent to the underworld so, through his meeting with the seer Tiresias, he might come into touch with the “basic form of things” and, more specifically, the “unity of male and female.” According to Homer, however, the purpose of Odysseus’s journey to the Land of the Dead was quite different: it was for Odysseus to learn from Tiresias what the impediments were regarding Odysseus’s return to his home on the isle of Ithaca and how he might best deal with these challenges.⁶³ Not dissimilarly, Mandell argues that, while the Epic of Gilgamesh as we have it is structured according to “the archetypal exchange of place paradigm” (a reference to Enkidu dying in Tablet VII, as Mandell sees it, “in place” of Gilgamesh), “somewhere in the development of the Gilgamesh traditions, there was a bard who must have had another agenda,” on which Mandell focuses her attention. Mandell’s description of this other agenda, more-over—“some ritual paradigm related to humanization and civilization, as well as initiation into young manhood”—seems to me to reflect a typically Campbellian (and therefore, in my opinion, problematic) stress on initiation as the central and critical phase of any hero’s life.⁶⁴ Is initiation, as I asked earlier, really the focus of premodern hero stories such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, or does it represent Campbell’s tendency to impose our twentieth-century interest in “finding oneself” on materials whose interests are manifestly different?

Also typically Campbellian in Mandell, and so again, in my opinion, problematic: the sense (as in Jung) that there are universal archetypes

(such as the exchange-of-place archetype) that are carried in the collective unconscious of the human community and are therefore reflected in all cultures' mythologies. Mandell in addition seems to me, in her already problematic discussion of heroic initiation, uncritically to follow Campbell's stress on the role of shamans in effecting that initiation, through her labeling of the huntsman's father, because he has "Special Knowledge/Wisdom" regarding Shamhat's abilities to tame Enkidu, as "incontestably shamanic."⁶⁵ I find this an extraordinarily bold claim to make about a character who appears in only one scene in the entire Epic and who in that scene utters only one speech, of just a dozen or so lines, all of which are fragmentary (Tablet I, lines 118–128).⁶⁶ It is furthermore a claim that becomes difficult to sustain once we realize that shamanistic ecstasis generally "was of little importance in Mesopotamia as a means of communication between gods and men."⁶⁷ Plus, it hardly seems to me that it requires "Special Knowledge/Wisdom" to suggest that the recently created Enkidu, as an animal-like creature of the steppe, will be distracted from destroying the huntsman's snares by means of seduction: one has only to watch male dogs flock to a bitch in heat to see how single-mindedly focused on sex male animals can be. Finally, note this statement by Mandell, which, with its speculation about the Gilgamesh Epic's hypothetical *Ur*-narrative, its focus on shamanism, and its thematic concern with a sort of spiritualized rebirth, is pure Campbell and thus I believe has embedded within it all the problems that can be found in Campbell's work:⁶⁸

There may have existed some tradition, long since forgotten by the time in which the Gilgamesh traditions were incorporated into their literary format, in which Enkidu was the Master of Animals, and Hunter Man's Father was the Shaman who made everything "work." That is, Enkidu was what Joseph Campbell has repeatedly called the "Alpha Beast," whose slaughter would ultimately be followed by regeneration and a renewed life for all beasts of his kind.

Yet despite my significant concerns, I still think Mandell helpfully discusses certain aspects of liminality in Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's characters and more generally in the Epic of Gilgamesh, pointing out, for example, that the description of Gilgamesh early on in the Epic as a being who is two-thirds divine and one-third human (Tablet I, line 46) positions him already at the beginning of the narrative as a character who exists on the *limen*, or the margin, between deity and mortal. Mandell also astutely points out that the journey to the Cedar Forest, an uncivilized and, indeed, otherworldly place (what she unfortunately describes as a "Never-Never-Land"), takes Gilgamesh and Enkidu into

“the realm of an extended liminality,”⁶⁹ and that Gilgamesh’s journey in liminality continues (rather than begins, as Anderson, Abusch, and Harris would have it) after Enkidu’s death, during Gilgamesh’s wilderness wanderings. As I have already suggested, I find the presence of these liminal indicators in the Epic crucial, and it is my contention that focusing on these and other aspects of liminality that I believe are found throughout the Gilgamesh narrative can illuminate the text’s use of erotic and sexual imagery that, as we have seen, otherwise remains an impediment in interpretation.

Liminality in the Epic of Gilgamesh

According to Turner, the most defining characteristic of the liminal state or the liminal persona is ambiguity; in Turner’s classic formulation, to be liminal is to be betwixt and between, separated (to use van Gennep’s terminology) from an earlier social structure or set of social conditions but not yet reaggregated or reincorporated (to use again van Gennep’s terms) into a new structure or set of conditions. “Liminal entities,” Turner writes in *The Ritual Process*, “are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”⁷⁰ As such, they are often described using symbols and images that themselves stand outside normative experiences and customary configurations and that emphasize “paradox, disorder, anomaly, opposition, and the like.”⁷¹ Turner even describes how some symbols of liminality depict paradox particularly vividly by representing both “birth *and* death, womb *and* tomb” (for example, caves) or by representing both “nature *and* culture” (for example, “theriomorphic figures, at once animals and men or women ... mermaids, centaurs, human-headed lions and so forth.”⁷²

A second important quality of liminal persons, Turner goes on to state, is that they are often represented “as possessing nothing.” The reason for this is “to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system.”⁷³ Indeed, so absent are marks of rank or distinction that Turner labels liminal persons, and more particularly groups comprised of liminal persons, as egalitarian. Because of their homogeneity and egalitarianism, Turner moreover argues, liminal groups experience what he calls *communitas*, a time of “intense social togetherness”⁷⁴ and of “union with one’s fellow human beings”⁷⁵ during which the distinctions and boundaries that usually keep people apart (for example, economic distinctions, status distinctions, kinship boundaries) dissolve. Still, as Turner makes clear (at least in his earlier writings), this liminal experience of *communitas* is not as wholly

idealized as it might at first sound, for although an intense sense of fellowship and solidarity is experienced *within* liminal groups, the liminars (to use Turner's word for liminal persons) find themselves subject to the absolute authority of those who stand outside their group yet somehow assume responsibility for it. Participants in an initiation ritual, for example, often find themselves required to submit passively and humbly to the demands of their community's ritual leaders, even though these leaders often punish initiates arbitrarily and typically impose upon them onerous tests and trials, including many of the hardships included in Droogers's list of liminal experiences that I cited above: fasting, seclusion, sexual continence, poverty, homelessness, silence.

At the same time, however, that these ritual leaders impose hardships upon liminal entities, they also typically reveal to initiates special *gnosis* or knowledge, and this experience of revelation is the third crucial component of the liminal state that Turner identifies in his discussions.⁷⁶ Especially important in this process is the revelation of the *sacra* or knowledge relating to things divine. "Sometimes secret names of deities or ancestors are revealed; sometimes the mythical history of the society is recounted in full; sometimes special incantations or creeds are taught."⁷⁷ Obviously, these are things that members of a believing community need to know, yet the point of the revelation is not just the transmittal of critical information. The more important goal is to bring liminal entities "into close connection with deity or with superhuman power" in order to instill or inculcate in them the crucial values and convictions of their community, to ground within them that which is cosmologically authoritative and thus unquestionably "true" and "real."⁷⁸ This is the "change" of which Turner is speaking when he writes, "The archaic knowledge or 'gnosis' obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the innermost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state. It is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in his being."⁷⁹

"Liminality," Turner summarizes, "is pure potency."⁸⁰ In liminality "social categories are played with, inverted, suspended, social borders are liquidated, crossed, blurred; identity symbols are stripped away and affixed anew."⁸¹ There result is an arena "where anything can happen, where immoderacy is normal, even normative, and where the elements of culture and society are released from their customary configurations and recombined in bizarre and terrifying imagery."⁸² In liminality what Turner calls the "subjunctive mood" of a culture prevails,⁸³ and imagination and paradox are encouraged, "all as part of a self-conscious quest for the basic truths of the human condition."⁸⁴



The degree to which these many markers of liminality can be found in the Epic of Gilgamesh is striking. Indeed, in the pages that follow I propose to explore several different examples of the use of liminal language and imagery within the Epic, in scenes that span from the tale's opening tablets to the text's climactic descriptions of Gilgamesh's encounter with Utnapishtim in Tablet XI.

The Gilgamesh Epic's Opening Scenes: Introducing Gilgamesh and Enkidu as Liminal Characters

Gilgamesh. I suggested above, following Mandell, that the depiction of Gilgamesh as two-thirds divine and one-third human that is found in Tablet I, line 46, positions Gilgamesh already at the beginning of his tale as a being who stands betwixt and between identities. Yet this is hardly the only way in which the Epic's introductory scenes demarcate Gilgamesh as a liminal character. Rather, the Epic's descriptions of Gilgamesh's boorish behaviors that oppress Uruk (whatever one interprets the particulars of these behaviors to be) may indicate that, as the narrative begins, Gilgamesh also stands on a *limen*, or margin, between civilization and barbarism.⁸⁵ Thus, while he, as king, is preeminently charged with maintaining civic order, he is nevertheless portrayed as the one who most threatens to rend the social fabric of his community.⁸⁶

In addition, the Epic, in describing Gilgamesh's rampages through his community, several times characterizes Gilgamesh as a "wild bull" (Tablet I, lines 28, 66, 195, 202), which could suggest he stands not only on the *limen* between civilization and barbarism, but on the *limen* between the human and animal worlds.⁸⁷ Gilgamesh's liminal nature in the Epic's opening scenes seems further illustrated by the Epic's somewhat peculiar representation of his royal stature, whereby Gilgamesh, supposedly Uruk's supreme authority, is portrayed as an almost helpless dependent when he beseeches his mother to interpret his two dreams that presage the coming of Enkidu (in the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. i, lines 1–3, 24–26; in the Standard version, Tablet I, lines 227–229, 255–257).⁸⁸ In the Epic's opening scenes Gilgamesh is described as well as *ḥadī-ū'a LÚ* (Tablet I, line 217), typically translated as something like "a man of quickly changing moods" or "a man of extreme feelings," but meaning, more literally, something like "the happy-woeful man."⁸⁹ He is a man, that is, whose basic emotional state is described as betwixt and between. Finally, we can note Gilgamesh's very name, which has been

interpreted by some to mean, "The Old One Is Youthful."⁹⁰ If this meaning is correct, it may again suggest Gilgamesh as a liminal character who stands betwixt and between the polarities of youth and old age.

Enkidu. Even more so is Enkidu marked as liminal from the moment he is first introduced in the Epic. He stands, for example, on the *limen*, or the margin, between animal and human, a being who runs with the beasts as if they are his peers and who, according at least to the Old Babylonian version, suckles these animals' milk (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. iii, lines 1–2).⁹¹ Yet he has been created as a counterpart for the god-*man* Gilgamesh and is created, moreover, by a birth goddess specifically lauded in the text for her skill in making *humanity* (Tablet I, line 78). In fact, despite his predominantly animal nature, Enkidu seems from the moment of his creation to have at least some human attributes, for, as Wilfried G. Lambert points out, he has the human brain capacity necessary to know how to disable the huntsman's traps, ingenuity his animal companions lack.⁹² Nevertheless, he allies with the animals against the trapper. In a perceptive study of Enkidu Gregory Mobley quotes G. S. Kirk, "Enkidu, although a man, is also the very antithesis of man."⁹³

Enkidu stands as well somewhat on the margin between male and female, and while, as I have noted above, this sort of androgyny may not be as universally characteristic of liminality as Turner has suggested, it does seem to serve as an important symbol of liminality in the Mesopotamian context, where "sex distinctions [were] important components of structural status." Consequently, "in a structureless [or liminal] realm they do not apply."⁹⁴ Thus, although Enkidu is otherwise male, his hair when he is first created is said to be like that of a woman's (Tablet I, lines 88–90):

All his body was shaggy with hair;
He was made with tresses like those of a woman;
The locks of his tresses grew luxuriantly, like grain.

In addition, according to at least the Old Babylonian version of the Epic (which is the better-preserved text at this point), Enkidu, when he begins his transition into the world of civilization after his week of lovemaking, is garbed in fabric torn from the *woman* Shamhat's garment (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. ii, lines 27–30):

She tore off (her) garment.
(With) one (piece), she clothed him;
(With) the other (piece of) the garment,

She clothed herself.

In this passage Enkidu can further be said to assume a betwixt-and-between position with regard to humanity and divinity that is somewhat similar to the “two-thirds god, one-third human” status that Gilgamesh holds. Thus, while the lovemaking with Shamhat serves, according to the Epic, as the catalyst that makes Enkidu *human*, she, immediately after their coitus ends, says to him (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. ii, line 11; cf. Tablet I, line 190, in the Standard version; the emphasis in the quote is mine):

“I look at you, O Enkidu,
Like a god you appear.”

We further see indications in this scene that Enkidu stands in a betwixt-and-between position in terms of age. His six-day and seven-night stint of lovemaking with Shamhat clearly signals that he has achieved at least the physical maturity associated with adulthood, but Shamhat’s act of clothing him after their intercourse is most reminiscent of what a mother would do for a child.⁹⁵ Enkidu in addition appears more childlike than adult, and Shamhat more like his mother than his lover,⁹⁶ in the episode that follows, when they reach the shepherds’ camp and she teaches him how to eat and drink (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. iii, lines 10–14):

The prostitute opened her mouth,
She says to Enkidu:
“Eat food, O Enkidu,
What is appropriate to life.
Drink beer, which is the custom of the land.”

Still, some twenty-five or so lines later, according, again, to the better-preserved Old Babylonian version, Enkidu is represented as more adultlike than child, as he and Shamhat once more make love (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. iv, line 2). As is typical of liminal entities, that is, Enkidu is “neither here nor there,” portrayed as both child and adult yet failing to conform completely to the attributes of either status.⁹⁷

It is in this same passage that Enkidu resolves to confront Gilgamesh after the young stranger who passes through the shepherds’ camp tells him about the marriage that is soon to take place in Uruk and about Gilgamesh’s intent to bed the bride before her husband can do so (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. iv, lines

3–32). Arguably, Enkidu is represented at this point as being in a betwixt-and-between position with regard to the institution of marriage—motivated to go to Uruk to challenge Gilgamesh because of what he perceives to be the latter’s violation of marriage custom, yet himself in a marriagelike relationship with the prostitute Shamhat that is hardly normative.⁹⁸ Finally, and perhaps most significantly with regard to Enkidu’s liminal nature in these opening scenes of the Epic, we should note that until he leaves for Uruk he dwells in the wilderness or the steppe. This is particularly noteworthy, because, for ancient Near Eastern traditions, the wilderness is *the* paradigmatic liminal space and its inhabitants are therefore *the* paradigmatic liminal beings. Leach, for example, writes of the biblical wilderness as “a ‘betwixt and between’ locality ... which is neither fully in This World nor in The Other.”⁹⁹

Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s Liminal Adventures: The Expedition to the Cedar Forest and the Fight Against Huwawa/Humbaba

Separation. Still, despite the presence of multiple liminal markers in the Epic’s opening scenes, it is only in the aftermath of the actual meeting of Enkidu and Gilgamesh, about a third of the way through the Standard version’s Tablet II, that a liminal phase within the Epic’s narrative truly begins, as it is only in the aftermath of their wrestling match that these two heroic characters are actually separated, to use the language of van Gennep’s rites-of-passage structure, from the sets of social conditions that have previously defined each’s existence: Gilgamesh from his harassing of Uruk’s citizenry generally and its newlyweds in particular and Enkidu from his rural homeland and from Shamhat. Alternatively, if we were to look to the language of Turner’s social drama model, we could say that it is only at this point in the Epic that the crisis that has been mounting in Uruk as a response to Gilgamesh’s oppressive behaviors—or what we might call, with Turner, his “breach of regular, norm-governed social relations”—begins to find redress.¹⁰⁰

But regardless of whether we use van Gennep’s or Turner’s language to describe what happens as a consequence of Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s combat, we can agree with both van Gennep and Turner that it is this separation or attempt at redress that initiates fully the Epic’s liminal phase. For example, as is typical of liminality, it is at this point that Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as liminal persons, become subject to onerous tests and trials, so that Gilgamesh, especially, who has previously imposed hardship upon others, is now faced with his own significant challenges, in particular the challenge he undertakes together with Enkidu in mounting an expedition against Huwawa/Humbaba. What makes this expedition especially worthy of our

consideration is the multiple ways in which it manifests features of the ordeals typically experienced by liminal entities.

The Role of the Ritual Leader. As I have described previously, for example, the ordeals typically experienced by liminal entities are usually imposed upon them by ritual leaders, individuals who stand outside the liminal community yet somehow assume authority over it. To be sure, in Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's case, it is not immediately evident who such ritual leaders might be. It is hard to see them as being residents of Uruk, since Gilgamesh, however irresponsible his exercise of authority, is still the supreme power within that body. Moreover, because Gilgamesh is "the greatest" among all of Mesopotamia's kings (Tablet I, line 27), it is hard to envision that there is a ritual authority within some other Mesopotamian city-state who could impose the undertaking of the Huwawa/Humbaba expedition upon Gilgamesh.

Nevertheless, the Epic, at least in the Standard version, does twice suggest that there is a superior being who instigates the Huwawa/Humbaba ordeal, the sun god Shamash. Thus, in Tablet III, line 46, Gilgamesh's mother, while importuning the sun god to keep her son safe on his journey, admits that it is Shamash who has incited her son to undertake the expedition, "You have touched him (*talpussuma*), and he will go." Likewise, in Tablet V, line 130, Huwawa/Humbaba identifies Shamash as the instigator of the assault on him, saying to Gilgamesh, "You attacked at the command of Shamash, the Lord of the Mountain."¹⁰¹ And though it might appear somewhat forced to ascribe to a deity the role of ritual leader, we should note that Turner accounts for exactly this sort of possibility: that among communities where there are no instructors or gurus, liminal ordeals are, as in Gilgamesh, often imposed through some otherworldly agency. Turner describes, for example, how dream visions can impose tests and trials upon Omaha boys during their solitary coming-of-age rituals in the wilderness. The authority of these dream visions, he insists, must be considered analogous to the authority of ritual leaders within other societies because both the otherworldly visions and the ritual leaders represent "the absolute, the axiomatic values of society in which are expressed the 'common good' and the common interest."¹⁰² This is surely an adequate description of Shamash's role in the Standard version of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Liminal Tests and Trials. We should further note that, as is again typical of the ordeals experienced during the liminal phase of a rite of passage, the tests and trials that Gilgamesh and Enkidu undergo as part of their expedition against Huwawa/Humbaba are enormous. Huwawa/Humbaba, for example, is described in the most terrifying of terms. He is said to be "fearsome" (*puluḫtu*) and "ferocious" (*dāpinu*)

because, according to some of the most vividly evocative lines in all of Akkadian poetry (in the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, lines 109–111, 196–197; in the Standard version, Tablet II, lines 191–192, 240–241, 253–254):¹⁰³

His roar is a flood,
His mouth is fire,
His breath is death.

According to the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, moreover, “strange is his face” (line 192), and the several clay masks from ancient Mesopotamia that have been convincingly identified as images of Huwawa/Humbaba show how apt a description this is.¹⁰⁴ Huwawa/Humbaba can even be represented in Mesopotamian tradition as demonic, that is, as an otherworldly and so an especially liminal being.¹⁰⁵ Huwawa’s/Humbaba’s dwelling place in the Cedar Forest is described as well, at least by the Old Babylonian version, in terms that are close to otherworldly, as a battleground that is “unequaled,” a place where a victory cannot be won (Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, lines 114–115, 199). In addition, both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions of the Epic depict the Cedar Forest in terms that identify it as the paradigmatically liminal space of the wilderness. The Old Babylonian version in particular stresses this wilderness’s isolated qualities, describing its borders as extending, for example, some “sixty double-hours” (Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, lines 107 and 194), or some four hundred or so miles (a double hour being the equivalent of six to seven miles, about the distance a traveler can walk in two hours).¹⁰⁶

The Revelation of the Sacra. Leach points out that the liminal qualities of wilderness space typically give rise to the characteristically liminal experience of divine inspiration and revelation, given that wilderness locations “stand at the boundary between This World and The Other and are therefore appropriate places for a meeting between the natural and the supernatural.”¹⁰⁷ For Gilgamesh and Enkidu, this divine inspiration and revelation takes the form of interactions with the sun god, Shamash. Thus, at the end of the Standard version’s Tablet IV, Shamash advises Gilgamesh and Enkidu about when to enter the Cedar Forest; then, in Tablet V, during the actual encounter with Huwawa/Humbaba, he raises thirteen gale winds that encircle the ferocious creature and hold him pinned so that Gilgamesh is able to slay him. Now, admittedly, Shamash’s role in providing this guidance and support may at first seem paradoxical, since it was Shamash, as we have seen, who initially set the confrontation with Huwawa/Humbaba as a challenge that Gilgamesh and Enkidu were to overcome, and presumably were to overcome unaided. But we should

recall that, according to Turner's description, the ritual leaders in a rite of passage typically play this sort of dual role, imposing upon their charges numerous tests and trials yet also providing to liminal entities the crucial *sacra* or divine knowledge they need to pass successfully through their ordeals. It is worth noting in this regard that although Shamash had previously been identified at several points in the Epic as Gilgamesh's patron deity, the one who "loves" Gilgamesh according to Tablet I, line 224, he first actually appears in the text during the ordeal in the Cedar Forest. Just as Turner's analysis would predict, that is, "close connection with deity or superhuman power" occurs in the narrative only within the context of a liminal moment of test and trial.¹⁰⁸

Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's Liminal Adventures: The Fight Against the Bull of Heaven

Separation. Turner's analysis would further predict that, after liminal entities overcome the challenges that have been set before them, they should be reaggregated or reincorporated into their communities. Yet, for Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the reaggregation or reincorporation that should follow their successful negotiation of the Huwawa/Humbaba challenge is, at best, only fleetingly realized;¹⁰⁹ to use the language of Turner's social drama model, the redress of the societal crisis that provoked the movement of the Epic's narrative into liminality is not yet accomplished. Gilgamesh and Enkidu do return victorious to Uruk, and Gilgamesh does reassume his position as king. Gilgamesh's resumption of his royal status is marked, moreover, by his bathing and changing into his royal robes (Tablet VI, lines 1–5), which are exactly the sorts of rituals of cleansing and clothing that Moran has described as central to transition moments within rites of passage elsewhere in the Epic. But despite this brief return to normalcy, Gilgamesh again, to use Turner's language, acts in a way that provokes a "breach of regular, norm-governed social relations,"¹¹⁰ defying the goddess Ishtar by rejecting her proposition of marriage—and thereby perhaps refusing, depending on how we interpret, to participate in the socially sanctioned and even socially mandated sacred marriage. Gilgamesh's catalog of Ishtar's former lovers insults the goddess to boot. Redressive action is surely called for, and so the Epic's liminal phase arguably resumes. Consequently, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are forced again to face tests and trials, this time in the form of the attack of the monstrous Bull of Heaven.

The Role of the Ritual Leader. As was the case in the Huwawa/Humbaba episode, it is important to note the typically liminal features of "Bull of Heaven" test and trial. For example, in the same way that

the Huwawa/Humbaba challenge was imposed on Gilgamesh and Enkidu by a divine being, Shamash, who in this respect performed the role of a rites-of-passage ritual leader, so too is it through divine agency that the Bull of Heaven is unleashed, sent forth by the head of the pantheon Anu in response to Ishtar's threats. Anu, furthermore, assumes a seemingly paradoxical position with regard to the Bull that is similar to the role Shamash assumed with regard to Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's confrontation with Huwawa/Humbaba and to the roles ritual leaders generally assume, according to Turner, in the rites-of-passage liminal phase. Thus, while Anu releases the Bull to Ishtar so that it can wreak havoc in Uruk, he at the same time works to protect those who must face this ordeal by requiring of Ishtar that seven years worth of foodstuffs be stored up in the city to compensate for the harvests that will fail on account of the Bull's complete devastation of the land.

Liminal Tests and Trials. The Bull is indeed utterly fearsome in terms of the devastation of which it is capable. For example, when the Bull reaches Uruk it is able, just by snorting, to open up two pits into which one hundred, and then two hundred, of the men of Uruk fall (Tablet VI, lines 121–124):

When the bull snorted, a pit opened up,
One hundred of the young men of Uruk fell into its midst.
When it snorted a second time, a pit opened up,
Two hundred young men of Uruk fell into its midst.

This is surely the sort of “bizarre and terrifying” image that Turner in his “Myth and Symbol” article cites as characteristic of liminality.¹¹¹

The Revelation of the Sacra. Gilgamesh and Enkidu, of course, survive their liminal ordeal with the Bull of the Heaven. But, as we have seen, their victory over this creature, and also their victory over Huwawa/Humbaba, is not realized without cost, as it is decreed at the beginning of Tablet VII that, as punishment for the two heroes' transgressions against these otherworldly monsters, Enkidu must die. Significant with regard to our current analysis is the fact that this punishment is revealed to Enkidu in a dream vision of the gods' divine council; that is, as is typical within liminal space and time, Enkidu experiences a revelation regarding the sacred. In fact, he receives two, for as Enkidu's death approaches he has a second dream in which he has a vision of the netherworld and the grim nature of the dead's existence there. Even more significantly, between these two dreams, as Enkidu rails against his fate, he is addressed directly by a deity, the sun god Shamash, who persuades Enkidu to rescind his cursing of the prostitute Shamhat, whom Enkidu had been deriding for bringing him

into the world of humanity that has led to his death. Shamash further makes known to Enkidu a special revelation concerning the honor that Gilgamesh and the people of Uruk will accord to him after his death.

Enkidu's Death and Gilgamesh's Journey Into the Wilderness: Liminal Tests and Trials and the Revelation of the Sacra

Separation. Gilgamesh does, in fact, accord Enkidu great honor after he dies, delivering a long and emotional lament, commissioning an elaborate memorial statue decorated with gold and lapis lazuli, and lavishing upon the dead Enkidu grave goods made of gold and other precious substances selected from his treasury. Gilgamesh engages as well in ritual mourning behaviors typical in ancient Mediterranean cultures, tearing out his hair and stripping off his royal raiment (Tablet VIII, lines 62–63):¹¹²

He was tearing out and shedding his curly hair,
He was ripping off and casting aside his finery, like it was something
taboo.

As I noted above, both Moran and Anderson correctly identify these mourning behaviors as typical of a rite of passage, separating the mourner from his normal position within his community's social structure by separating him from the normal markers of his status and position (dressed hair, regular clothing). This point is in addition made by Harris.¹¹³ Typically, however, as I have also noted above, this ritual separation in ancient Mesopotamian tradition lasted for only seven days, at which point the "mourner returns to the community by means of aggregation rites."¹¹⁴ Yet, although Gilgamesh acknowledges that seven days is the proper duration of the mourning ritual (in his speeches to the alewife Siduri, the ferryman Sursunabu/Urshanabi, and Utnapishtim; Tablet X, lines 63, 137, and 236), he fails to end his mourning according to this schedule and reassume his normal place within Uruk's social structure.¹¹⁵ Instead Gilgamesh dons the skins of lions and lets his hair grow matted and disheveled (Tablet VII, lines 144–145, Tablet VIII, lines 88–89). He then leaves Uruk to wander the steppe.

Liminal Tests and Trials. As Anderson in particular interprets, Gilgamesh at this point enters into an extended liminal period that will continue until he finally comes to terms with his own mortality at the end of Tablet XI. My own analysis would differ in its understanding that, from the beginning of the Epic, Gilgamesh is defined as a liminal character who seems to live primarily a marginal existence, especially

from the time of his initial encounter with Enkidu. Still, one must admit with Anderson (and, somewhat similarly, with Abusch and Harris) that the part of the Epic that describes Gilgamesh's wanderings is especially filled with liminal features. For example, the very act of wandering (*rapādu*), which is stressed over and over in the descriptions of Gilgamesh's movements (Tablet VII, line 145, Tablet VIII, line 89, Tablet IX, lines 2, 5, Tablet X, lines 46, 53, 66, 68, 70, 81, 120, 127, 139, 141, 142, 152, 219, 226, 239, 241, 243), implies a quality of aimlessness reminiscent of the ambiguity that characterizes liminality. We can again note, moreover, following Leach, how the very wilderness in which Gilgamesh roams is a paradigmatically liminal space.

In fact, this wilderness is even more otherworldly and thus more liminal in character than was the otherworldly wilderness of the Cedar Forest in which Gilgamesh and Enkidu encountered Huwawa/Humbaba, as Gilgamesh travels in his despairing wanderings well beyond the confines of human habitation, to the very ends of the earth. There he comes to Mount Mashu, the peak on the world's eastern edge from which the sun rises, whose upper reaches are said to support the sky and whose base lies in the netherworld (Tablet IX, lines 38–41):

He reached Mount Mashu,
Which daily guards the rising of [the sun],
Whose summits [rise] to the vault of the heavens,
Whose flanks (literally “breasts”) reach the netherworld below.

This is truly, to quote Leach yet again, a place “at the boundaries between This World and The Other.”¹¹⁶ Yet even though the Epic's descriptions of Mount Mashu might seem maximally to represent the characteristics of liminal space, Gilgamesh finds a way to journey beyond the mountain and into an even more liminal setting, traveling twelve double hours through Mashu's interior to leave this world entirely behind. He then reaches a garden paradise with a sea beyond. It is this sea Gilgamesh must cross in order to come to his ultimate destination, the dwelling place of Utnapishtim.¹¹⁷

All this journeying through the typically liminal space of the wilderness is filled, as one would predict, with the typically liminal experience of tests and trials (Gilgamesh's “toils and travail” [*anaḥu* and *šāṭu*], in the words of Utnapishtim and his wife [Tablet XI, line 268 and 273]). Gilgamesh initially encounters lions, which he is said to fear (*palāḥu*; Tablet IX, line 9), and then the dreadful scorpion-men who guard Mount Mashu's gate.¹¹⁸ They, like the lions, are also said to be fearsome (*puluḥtu*) and in addition terrifying (*rašābu*), able to kill with

their very look (Tablet IX, lines 42–43; see too lines 46–47):

There were scorpion-men guarding the gate,
Terrifying in their fearsomeness, their gaze (causing) death.

The ordeal of transversing Mashu's interior is equally fearsome, as, like the nighttime journey of the sun through the netherworld, it is utterly dark.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, although Gilgamesh emerges from his transverse of Mashu's interior into a seemingly paradisiacal garden, he almost immediately must confront a new trial, crossing the foreboding waters of death that lie in the midst of the sea that separates the garden paradise from the dwelling place of Utnapishtim. This trial he makes all the harder on himself through his reckless destruction of some mysterious stone objects whose precise nature remains unclear to scholars but somehow previously enabled Utnapishtim's ferryman, Sursunabu/Urshanabi, to cross the waters of death safely. As a result of their loss, Gilgamesh must undertake the manufacture of immense punting poles that can be used as an alternative means to propel Urshanabi's boat; when, in the course of the journey across the sea, all these punting poles are used up and the waters of death still have not been crossed, Gilgamesh must position himself as if he were a mast in Urshanabi's boat and hold aloft his clothes to serve as a sail. And, during his sojourn with Utnapishtim, Utnapishtim imposes upon Gilgamesh yet another trial, the test of staying awake six days and seven nights.

The Revelation of the Sacra. As is typical in this time of liminal testing, Gilgamesh experiences divine inspiration and revelation, from, first, the sun god Shamash. Or at least he does so in the Old Babylonian version, which describes how Shamash comes to Gilgamesh during his wanderings and urges him to abandon his futile quest for eternal life (Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment, col. i, lines 5–8):

Shamash was distressed;
He spoke to Gilgamesh:
“Gilgamesh, where do you rove?
The life you seek, you will not find.”

The most extended revelation Gilgamesh receives regarding things divine, however, is the story of the flood, told to Gilgamesh by Utnapishtim once Gilgamesh finally reaches the flood hero's domain. It is especially crucial to note here that although scholars today understand the story of the flood as found in the Epic's Tablet XI to be

an only slightly modified version of the flood tale well known from elsewhere in Mesopotamian tradition, the Epic—or at least the Standard version—takes great care to stress that the story Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh *is* in fact a revelation.¹²⁰ Thus, the Standard version's prologue explicitly identifies Utnapishtim's story of the flood and the events that preceded it as something that was "secret" (*niširtu*) and "hidden" (*katāmu*) before Gilgamesh brought the tale back to Uruk and introduced it into Mesopotamian cultural history (Tablet I, line 5).¹²¹ Even more significantly, Utnapishtim, as he begins to relate the story to Gilgamesh (Tablet XI, lines 9–10), identifies it as not only "secret" (*niširtu*) but also as a divine secret, "the secret lore of the gods" (*pirišta ša ilī*). In discussing Turner's understanding of liminality above, I noted that in the process of the revelation of the *sacra* "sometimes the mythical history of the society is recounted."¹²² Utnapishtim's recounting of the flood story to Gilgamesh is a premier example of this phenomenon.

As Gilgamesh's liminal experience of revelation continues, moreover (at least in the Standard version; the Old Babylonian version, as I noted in [chapter 2](#), seems to have ended shortly after Gilgamesh wakes up from his weeklong sleep),¹²³ Utnapishtim discloses to Gilgamesh yet another "secret" (*niširtu*) and more "secret lore of the gods" (*pirišta ša ilī*), the secret of the magical "Plant of Rejuvenation" (Tablet XI, lines 275–276).¹²⁴ It is further of significance that Utnapishtim uses the phrase "secret lore of the gods" (*pirišta ša ilī*) at one other point in his discussions with Gilgamesh: in the midst of his recital of the flood story, when he describes that he knew of the gods' intent to send the flood and knew how to survive it because the god Ea revealed his fellow deities' "secret" plan to him (Tablet XI, lines 195–196).¹²⁵ In terms of our analysis what this passage intimates is that, although Utnapishtim plays the role of a ritual leader who reveals sacred knowledge to Gilgamesh during the latter's rites-of-passage experience, Utnapishtim previously, during the time of the great flood, received the sort of divine revelation that liminal persons typically are granted. Furthermore, the flood itself can surely be described as the sort of great ordeal undergone by liminal entities, and, in fact, Turner has suggested that the sea, and so by extension the flood's waters on which Utnapishtim floated in the boat that Ea revealed he should build, often serves as a liminal symbol, a wild place on which one wanders, leaving one's normal community behind.¹²⁶ All of which is to say: Utnapishtim, at least in terms of his past adventures, must himself be understood, like Gilgamesh, as a liminal figure.¹²⁷

Indeed, I would argue that Utnapishtim and his wife, as the only mortals granted immortality by the gods, are still in some sense liminal at the point at which Gilgamesh encounters them. Note especially in

this regard the liminal nature of their dwelling place, not on the earth, the place of humanity, yet not in heaven, the place of the gods.¹²⁸ As inhabitants of such a betwixt-and-between space, they serve as perfect representatives of all the betwixt-and-between lands in which Gilgamesh has wandered and all the betwixt-and-between experiences he has had. So too do many of the other beings Gilgamesh encounters in his roaming serve as these sorts of betwixt-and-between representatives:¹²⁹ for example, the betwixt-and-between scorpion-men who guard Mount Mashu's gate (recall, in this regard, Turner's discussion of theriomorphic figures as liminal symbols);¹³⁰ also, as I shall discuss fully in [chapter 5](#), the alewife who lives on the shore of Tablet X's otherworldly sea.

*Enkidu's Death and Gilgamesh's Journey Into the Wilderness:
Gilgamesh as a Liminal Character*

God/Man/Corpse. I have just noted how almost all the individuals whom Gilgamesh meets in the course of his wilderness wanderings can be described as liminal: Utnapishtim and his wife, the scorpion-men who guard Mount Mashu's gate, and the alewife Siduri who lives on the shore of Tablet X's otherworldly sea. But what is most significant for my discussion here are the many ways in which Gilgamesh too manifests a betwixt-and-between identity during the liminal journey he makes to Utnapishtim's dwelling place.¹³¹ When Gilgamesh comes to Mount Mashu, for example, he is described—notably, for the first time since the Epic's opening lines—according to his liminal status as two-thirds divine and one-third human (Tablet IX, line 52).¹³² However, in many respects this description of Gilgamesh as god-man seems to be used ironically, for, as Anderson points out, Gilgamesh at this point in the Epic is much better analyzed as one caught between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. Thus, while he is, of course, still physically alive, he appears as if he were one of the denizens of the netherworld, who are described for us in Tablet XII as going about, like Gilgamesh, unanointed and wearing tatters.¹³³ The wilderness in which Gilgamesh wanders can in fact be understood as the gateway into the netherworld according to Mesopotamian tradition and so represents to some degree the realm of the dead itself.¹³⁴ The implication, as Anderson writes, is that “Gilgamesh, the passionate seeker of life, embarks on a journey that leads him into the land of death.”¹³⁵

Man/Beast. As I have already briefly mentioned (above, p. 114), Gilgamesh at this point in the Epic is also well described as existing on the boundary between human and beast, as he wears the skins of animals, is covered as they are with matted hair, and roams as they do

through the steppe. Like them too, he consumes flesh (*šīrum*) for food (Tablet X, line 261, Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment, col. i, line 2).¹³⁶ Many scholars have noted that the animal-like characteristics described for Gilgamesh here recall the descriptions of Enkidu when he was first created and when he stood on the *limen*, or the margin, between animal and human.¹³⁷ Jeffrey H. Tigay in particular points to some striking linguistic correspondences: Enkidu, before his coming to Uruk, is said to wander (*rapādu*) the steppe (Tablet I, line 191, Tablet II, lines 7, 21), just as is Gilgamesh after Enkidu's death, and "the reaction of the hunter when he first saw Enkidu and the appearance of Gilgamesh while he wandered the steppe are described in practically identical terms: 'Woe in his belly; / his face like that of a wayfarer from afar.'" ¹³⁸ Anderson adds that both Gilgamesh and Enkidu strike fear in those who see them (Tablet I, lines 96–104, Tablet X, lines 1–14),¹³⁹ and Jack M. Sasson suggests that the "facts of mortal life" Gilgamesh utters early on when encouraging the reluctant Enkidu to go forth on the expedition to confront Huwawa/Humbaba—"As for humankind, his days are numbered" (Tablet II, line 203; see too the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, line 142)—are precisely those Gilgamesh in his wilderness wanderings struggles to apprehend.¹⁴⁰

We should note as well the degree to which Gilgamesh's journey to the otherworldly locale of Mount Mashu, which lies in the far *east*, the place of the rising of the sun, stands in structural relationship to the journey Gilgamesh and Enkidu make together (and which Enkidu is previously said to have made alone: in the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, lines 105–108, 251–254; in the Standard version, Tablet III, lines 6–7) to the otherworldly Cedar Forest, which is located in the far *west*, in or near Lebanon.¹⁴¹ It is further of note that the same term, "fearsome" (*puluhtu*), is used to describe Huwawa/Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest, and the scorpion-men who guard Mount Mashu's gate. A. Leo Oppenheim suggests, moreover, that the Epic's depiction of the paradisiacal "Garden of the Gods" that Gilgamesh reaches after his transverse of Mashu's interior "patently duplicates" the text's portrayal of the landscape of Huwawa's/Humbaba's Cedar Forest (Tablet V, lines 7–8), "which our poet describes with that warmth of feeling and intensity of expression which are characteristic for all passages in the epic in which the beauty of nature is described":¹⁴²

On the mountain's slope, the cedars put forth abundant yield,
Their shade was good, full of delight.

Gilgamesh's dark journey of twelve double hours through the interior of Mount Mashu, which represents the nighttime journey of the sun through the netherworld, can further be understood as standing in

structural relationship to the last “journey” Enkidu made in his lifetime, his twelve-day descent from life into death (Tablet VII, lines 259–272).

Man/Woman. Like Enkidu too, the liminal Gilgamesh stands posed between the gender polarities of male and female. Enkidu, recall, when originally created, was explicitly identified as having hair like a woman’s although he was male, and even after he proves beyond doubt his ability to perform as a man (during his week of uninterrupted intercourse with Shamhat), she garbs him in some of her womanly clothing. Then, as the Epic continues, Enkidu is identified according to other typically female markers. For example, in Tablet IV, as he and Gilgamesh journey toward Huwawa’s/Humbaba’s Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh ritually provokes three dreams in an attempt to determine whether the gods will look favorably on the two heroes’ enterprise. The imagery that Gilgamesh sees in these dreams—of a mountain that collapses on top of Gilgamesh and of an all-consuming fire—is difficult to understand, in part because the text as it has come down to us is very fragmentary and in part because Gilgamesh’s visions are so highly symbolic.¹⁴³ But what is important for our purposes is the fact that the task of interpreting these prescient dreams is assumed by Enkidu. Previously in the narrative, however, dream interpretation is a task that had been assumed by a woman, Gilgamesh’s mother. Furthermore, as both Julia M. Asher-Greve and Rivkah Harris have pointed out, it is usually women who are identified as expert in interpreting dreams in Mesopotamian sources.¹⁴⁴ In Sumerian tradition, for instance, it is a goddess, Nanše, who is the dream interpreter of the gods,¹⁴⁵ and in Old Assyrian tradition, only female dream interpreters are attested.¹⁴⁶ In fact, Oppenheim has noted that the scene in which Enkidu interprets Gilgamesh’s dreams is the *sole* point in all the epic literature of Mesopotamia (and similarly of Asia Minor) where a male functions as a dream interpreter.¹⁴⁷ According, that is, both to the specific context of the Gilgamesh Epic and to Mesopotamian tradition more generally, Enkidu, in taking on the role of dream interpreter, performs what is otherwise a typically female function. Also, of course, within the Tablet I dreams of Gilgamesh, Enkidu is portrayed as womanlike, in both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions’ accounts of the axe dream and in the Standard version’s account of the meteor dream, when it is said he will be to Gilgamesh “like a wife.” As we have seen, this imagery of Enkidu as Gilgamesh’s wife is repeated in Tablet VIII, when Gilgamesh veils the dead Enkidu “like a bride.”¹⁴⁸

Yet, interestingly enough, Gilgamesh, although presumably at some level the groom who is partnered with Enkidu’s metaphorical bride, is in addition portrayed as womanlike in Tablet VIII’s deathbed scene. For example, immediately after covering Enkidu’s face “like a bride,”

Gilgamesh is said to pace ceaselessly around the body, like a *lioness* over her cubs (Tablet VIII, lines 58–61):¹⁴⁹

He covered the face of his friend like a bride,¹⁵⁰
Like an eagle, he circled above him.
Like a lioness whose cubs are in a pit,
He paced to and fro, forwards and backwards.

Likewise in the same scene, Gilgamesh is said to compare the lamentation he plans to raise over the dead Enkidu to that which would be performed by a *lallaritu*, or wailing woman (Tablet VIII, lines 41–44):

“Hear me, O young warriors, hear me!
Hear me, O elders of Uruk, hear me!
I will weep for Enkidu, my friend,
Like a wailing woman (*lallaritu*), I will wail bitterly.”

Moreover, even if Gilgamesh had not offered this explicit comparison of himself to a wailing woman, we would have to identify his mourning behaviors as womanlike in many respects, for, as Harris again notes, the sorts of lamentation and keening that Gilgamesh plans to undertake after Enkidu’s death were usually in Mesopotamia associated with women.¹⁵¹ We should further note that it is possible to suggest that, like Enkidu in this deathbed scene, Gilgamesh is represented using imagery that is not only womanlike but wifelike, at least if, following Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, we interpret his mourning over Enkidu as being like a widow’s.¹⁵²



Still, as much as Gilgamesh and Enkidu are said to take on womanlike roles and even wifelike roles with respect to one another, the fact is, as I have described in [chapter 3](#), that they are not wifelike in their interactions with one another in a very crucial way, for relationships between husbands and wives were, in Mesopotamia, strictly hierarchical, whereas Gilgamesh and Enkidu are unremittingly portrayed as equals. Likewise, as we have seen also in [chapter 3](#), same-sex erotic interactions in Mesopotamian tradition were strictly hierarchical in structure rather than being patterned according to the model of Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s egalitarian relationship. Armed, however, with our analysis regarding the Epic’s liminal qualities, and regarding Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s liminal characteristics, we are now

prepared to revisit this seeming conflict between, on the one hand, the Epic's unrelieved insistence on the two heroes' egalitarianism, and, on the other, the Epic's frequent use of the hierarchically dependent language of erotic and sexual relationships in its descriptions of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's interactions. And what we are now prepared to make clear is that this conflict, which otherwise has created such an impasse in scholars' attempts to define the nature of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship, *is precisely the point*. Because the Epic tradition has sought to characterize Gilgamesh and Enkidu using liminal markers, it employs language that both suggests the two heroes conform to Mesopotamia's superior-inferior/active-passive sexual paradigm in their interactions with one another and suggests simultaneously they do not, for, indeed, they both do and do not, just as the liminal is "that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both."¹⁵³ As what is perhaps Turner's most often-cited formulation of liminality would claim, Gilgamesh and Enkidu as liminal entities are "neither here nor there, betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."¹⁵⁴ They are, as the "essence of liminality" as defined by Turner requires, "release[d] from normal constraints," so that the "ordinary constructions of common sense" within the Mesopotamian worldview are "reconstructed in novel ways," ways that more typically in the Mesopotamian perspective would seem "bizarre," even "to the point of monstrosity." Within liminality's domain of "uncommon sense," however, these bizarre and even monstrous reconstructions are precisely what we should expect.¹⁵⁵

To put the matter another way: using the lens of Turner's theory of liminality, what we can now see is that the eroticized and sexualized imagery the Epic of Gilgamesh uses in its descriptions of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship does not conform to the Mesopotamian norms that mandate a hierarchalized structure within sexual interactions (whether they be same-sex or opposite-sex) because it is inherent in the very nature of the Epic's structure that its representations of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship do not conform. Gilgamesh and Enkidu, throughout most of the Epic, are liminal characters whose relationship takes place within the boundaries of liminal time and liminal space. Their relationship, therefore, is characterized in a manner that defies Mesopotamian cultural convention. Just as Turner's description of liminality would predict, that is, "the classifications on which order normally depends are annulled or obscured,"¹⁵⁶ so that Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship is consistently characterized in ways that deviate from—and in fact stand in opposition to—the normal social structures of Mesopotamian society. There is, in short, "a confusion of all the customary categories"

of Mesopotamian culture,¹⁵⁷ and thus the eroticized language and imagery that are normally used only to describe sexual relationships that are hierarchical, whether opposite-sex or same-sex, can be used to describe a relationship of equals.

Previous commentators who have looked at the Gilgamesh Epic's homoeroticized imagery have let themselves get distracted by the question (to use modern parlance) "are they or are they not gay?" But this is not the Epic's question. The Epic's question is "are they or are they not liminal?" Because, moreover, its answer is "they are," the Epic intentionally portrays Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship through the use of eroticized and sexualized imagery that is anomalous and ambiguous—that is, liminal—within the Mesopotamian context. In the previous chapter I quoted Charles R. Beye as arguing that there could be "no sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu" because "ancient narrators ... were explicit about sexuality and would have made clear any sexual relationship."¹⁵⁸ What Beye has failed to recognize, however, is that in the case of the Epic of Gilgamesh the ancient narrators' thematic needs were best served by ambiguity. "Paradox ... lies at the heart of rites of passage."¹⁵⁹ Rather than standing as an impediment to our interpretation, the ambiguous and paradoxical imagery that the Epic of Gilgamesh uses to describe the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu should be seen as integral to the Epic's lifeblood.

THE LIMINAL HERO, PART 2



I suggested in the previous chapter that understanding the Epic of Gilgamesh generally according to the rites-of-passage template originally proposed by Arnold van Gennep, and more specifically understanding the characters Gilgamesh and Enkidu and the depictions of their relationship according to the descriptions of the rites-of-passage's liminal phase that have been advanced by Victor Turner, provides us with an explanation of the Epic's use of homoeroticized imagery that has previously stymied scholars in their attempts at interpretation. What I hope to show in this chapter is how the use of the rites-of-passage model and a focus on liminality can illuminate other aspects of the Epic's descriptions of Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and their interactions. In particular, in the second section I will discuss the reaggregation or reintegration stage in the rites-of-passage model as understood by van Gennep and Turner and how their analyses might help illuminate some of the concluding scenes in both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions of the Epic. One of these scenes will be the speech in the Old Babylonian version in which the alewife Siduri urges Gilgamesh to abandon his futile quest for immortality in favor of the pleasures of human society and human sociability, by which I anticipate my more general discussion in the third section of this chapter of the role that Siduri, as well as three other female characters—Shamhat, Ishtar, and Utnapishtim's wife—play in the Epic's portrayals of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's lives. Before I turn to these matters, however, let me begin with some less substantive but nevertheless intriguing illustrations of the insights a rites-of-passage interpretation of the Epic of Gilgamesh might allow.

Liminal Puns, Liminal Communitas

Liminal Puns

As I described in [chapter 3](#), Anne Draffkorn Kilmer has argued that two

puns—wordplays on the terms *kīṣru/kezru* and *ḥaṣṣinnu(m)/assinnu(m)*—are found in the Standard version’s account of Gilgamesh’s meteor dream that presages the coming of Enkidu and in the Old Babylonian and Standard versions’ accounts of the corresponding axe dream.¹ I also described in [chapter 3](#) Stephanie M. Dalley’s proposal that a pun using the terms *zikru* and *sekru* is present in Tablet I’s account of the creation of Enkidu as a “counterpart” for Gilgamesh.² As I discussed, the wordplay in each of these cases compares Enkidu as *kīṣru*, “meteor,” Enkidu as *ḥaṣṣinnu(m)*, “axe,” and Enkidu as *zikru*, “counterpart,” to a male functionary—the *kezru*, *assinnu(m)*, and *sekru*—who is part of the cultic entourage of Ishtar, the goddess of sex and love. My point in those previous discussions was to show how eroticized these comparisons are and how they thus might suggest Enkidu is to be interpreted as an object of Gilgamesh’s erotic and sexual desire.

What is worthy of our attention at this point, however, is the degree to which the *kezru*, *assinnu(m)*, and *sekru* as cultic servitors of Ishtar are liminal in nature. The *kezru*, for example, is associated with prostitution, which, as I will discuss more thoroughly in the third section of this chapter, is a very liminal profession, as it brings women into relationship with men in ways that stand totally antithetical to the normal and normative structure of male-female relationships in Mesopotamian society.³ The *assinnu(m)* likewise seems a liminal character, eroticized and sexualized through his associations with Ishtar, yet nevertheless, as I have earlier quoted Martti Nissinen as suggesting, asexual in certain ways: a eunuchlike individual who, in the words of one text, typically “fails to achieve a sexual climax during intercourse.”⁴ Moreover, in logographic writing (writing in which cuneiform signs stand for full words), the *assinnu(m)* is designated as *ur. SAL*, which means literally “man-woman,” and a passage in the eighth-century BCE myth of Erra and Ishum somewhat similarly describes Ishtar as having turned the *assinnus* from men into women.⁵ It is hard to imagine more paradigmatically liminal descriptions than these sex-ambiguous characterizations, at least within the Mesopotamian cultural context, in which sex distinctions were structurally important.⁶ As for the *sekru*, I have earlier noted that Dalley describes him as having “uncertain sexual affinities,”⁷ a statement that in its ambiguity is again paradigmatically liminal. Understanding this liminal imagery, I suggest, gives the puns to which Kilmer and Dalley have pointed us a heightened significance: Enkidu is compared to the *kezru*, *assinnu(m)*, and *sekru* not only to suggest he is an object of Gilgamesh’s erotic and sexual desire, as Kilmer and Dalley have proposed, but further to indicate that he, like these Ishtar devotees, is a liminal character whose eroticized and sexualized interactions with

Gilgamesh must be interpreted against a backdrop of liminal ambiguity.

Liminal Communitas (Especially as Illustrated by Comparing the Akkadian Versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh with Its Sumerian Antecedents)

Understanding the centrality of liminal imagery in the Gilgamesh Epic also allows us to see a heightened significance in the observations of Thorkild Jacobsen and Jeffrey H. Tigay that I cited in [chapter 2](#) and elaborated upon in [chapter 3](#) regarding the Epic's consistent portrayal of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as equals.⁸ For Jacobsen and Tigay, recall, the Akkadian tradition insists on this reconceptualization of the older Sumerian accounts, which represented Gilgamesh and Enkidu as master and servant, in order to advance its larger thematic agenda regarding Gilgamesh's despair at the loss of his beloved friend and his desperate quest for eternal life that is the result. In this analysis Jacobsen and Tigay, among others, are certainly correct, but understanding the Epic's liminal qualities allows us to see that something else is going on here. In insisting on Gilgamesh and Enkidu as equals, the Epic portrays Gilgamesh and Enkidu as representatives of the typically liminal experience of egalitarianism. In fact, Turner specifically describes liminality as an arena in which "distinctions of rank or status disappear or are homogenized," a statement that could hardly capture more precisely the changes that Jacobsen, Tigay, and others have noted with regard to the epic tradition's movement out of its original Sumerian context and into the Akkadian world.⁹ Thus Sumerian "distinctions of rank or status"—the language describing Enkidu as *ARAD* or *ardu*, "slave" or "servant," and Gilgamesh as *bēlu*, "master"—almost entirely disappear (see only the somewhat anomalous and tenuously affiliated Tablet XII, lines 7 and 54), and the two heroes' homogeneity becomes the norm.¹⁰

Indeed, it is quite notable that, in the tradition's move out of its original Sumerian context and into the Akkadian world, the two heroes' homogeneity becomes the norm despite the fact that, in the Akkadian Epic, Gilgamesh is still technically Enkidu's superior in terms of status (Gilgamesh is, after all, Uruk's king). In keeping, however, with the Akkadian Epic's liminally egalitarian thrust, language that calls attention to Gilgamesh's status-superior position (for example, *šarru*, "king"; *šarnūtu*, "kingship") is rarely employed: just fourteen times, by my count, in all of the Epic's three thousand lines. Strikingly, moreover, only half of these occurrences are found in what I have described in [chapter 4](#) as the Epic's fully liminal phase, even though this fully liminal phase—which begins in the aftermath of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's

wrestling match, about a third of the way through the Standard version's Tablet II, and ends (as I will discuss further below) subsequent to Gilgamesh's visit to Utnapishtim's dwelling place in Tablet XI—comprises approximately eighty-five percent of the Epic's text.¹¹

Turner furthermore argues that the liminal qualities of egalitarianism and homogeneity facilitate what he calls *communitas*, the experience of utter and intense fellowship that liminal persons, according to Turner, typically enjoy. As Turner writes, once “jurally sanctioned relationships” and “institutionalized roles” dissolve, “deep friendships” that are “expressive of the common weal” can develop.¹² Again, these observations of Turner's might be said to capture perfectly the particular situation in the Gilgamesh Epic: once the “jurally sanctioned relationship” and the “institutionalized roles” of Enkidu as subject and Gilgamesh as king dissolve, in the aftermath of the wrestling match, then the liminal Gilgamesh and Enkidu are in a position to experience the deepest of friendships, one of absolute fellowship and solidarity. Particularly significant in this regard is the term *ibru*, “friend,” that the Epic uses almost incessantly (up to 150 times, according to one recent catalog) to describe who Gilgamesh and Enkidu are in relation to one another.¹³ With respect to their absolute solidarity, we should think also of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's inseparability once they meet; of their single-minded focus on one another, to the exclusion of almost all others, throughout the course of their interactions; and, of course, of the inconsolable grief Gilgamesh manifests upon Enkidu's death.

As above, moreover, comparing the Sumerian tradition to the Akkadian is revealing, especially comparing the Sumerian and Akkadian traditions regarding Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's expedition to confront Huwawa/Humbaba.¹⁴ In the Sumerian, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are accompanied on their journey to Huwawa's domain by fifty other young men from Uruk, but in the Akkadian these fifty Urukites disappear. Instead, in accord with its stress on Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's liminal characteristics and the liminal bond of utter, even exclusionary solidarity that exists between them, the Akkadian Epic depicts the two heroes as going forth to confront Huwawa/Humbaba alone, dependent solely upon each other for their mission's success.

Another difference between the Sumerian and Akkadian accounts of the Huwawa/Humbaba story is the role of Uruk's elders (*šibūtu*). These men are not mentioned at all in the Sumerian tale, but in the Akkadian, in both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions, Gilgamesh, before he leaves, speaks to the elders of Uruk about his proposed expedition. His intent, it seems, at least according to the somewhat better-preserved Old Babylonian version, is to secure at a minimum their support and even possibly their permission. He says to them (Old

As for me, Gilgamesh, let me see the one of whom they speak (that is,
 Huwawa/Humbaba),
 The one whose name the lands keep repeating;
 Let me conquer him in the Cedar Forest.
 “How strong is the sprout of Uruk” (that is, Gilgamesh),
 Let me cause the land to hear.
 Let me set my hand; let me cut down cedars;
 Let me set for myself a name forever!”

In the Standard version Gilgamesh also asks Uruk’s young men (the *erlu*) and his mother, it seems (the context is fragmentary), to bless his expedition (Tablet II, line 225, Tablet III, line 27). These details are again absent from the Sumerian text, in which Gilgamesh does not seek counsel even from the fifty of Uruk’s young men who accompany him to the Cedar Forest. Once more, Turner’s descriptions of *communitas* help us understand these changes by explaining that the statuslessness of liminal entities, although it breaks down social distinctions in order to allow them to experience intense solidarity and friendship among themselves, simultaneously renders these liminars devoid of the power and authority that status can otherwise provide. As a consequence, they become ever more answerable to the power and authority of individuals who stand outside their liminal community. Turner writes, indeed, that participants in many rites of passage “have to submit to an authority that is nothing less than that of the *total community*” (emphasis mine),¹⁶ a point the Standard version illustrates especially well by having Gilgamesh solicit support from so many different constituencies within Uruk.

Moreover, I have argued in [chapter 4](#) that, in the course of the Huwawa/Humbaba episode, the sun god Shamash exercises the particular type of power and authority that a community’s ritual leaders typically assert over liminal entities, by imposing upon Gilgamesh and Enkidu the ordeal of their expedition against the Cedar Forest’s guardian and by coming to the two heroes’ aid in their time of greatest trial. What I did not note in my discussion in [chapter 4](#), however, is that this sense of Shamash as instigator of the Huwawa/Humbaba expedition is yet again a detail that is *added* in the Akkadian version of the Epic; in the Sumerian account of the Huwawa adventure, the journey to Huwawa’s domain is undertaken at Gilgamesh’s own initiative.¹⁷ In keeping, though, with my analysis in this chapter, I now propose that this recasting of Shamash’s role in the Akkadian is consistent with and, in fact, is generated by the Akkadian Epic’s interest in portraying Gilgamesh and Enkidu as liminal figures on

Liminality's End

I further noted in [chapter 4](#) that Turner's convictions regarding his four-part social drama, and his related notions regarding van Gennep's tripartite rites-of-passage model, assume an underlying temporal structure and consequently change; liminality, to put the matter somewhat more bluntly, does not last forever. It is succeeded, in van Gennep's terms, by reaggregation or reincorporation or, in Turner's language, by reintegration. I would maintain that a consideration of that moment of reaggregation or reintegration helps us understand better some of the concluding scenes of the Gilgamesh Epic in both the Old Babylonian and Standard versions.

Reaggregation in the Old Babylonian Version of the Epic

In the Old Babylonian version of the Epic, Gilgamesh, toward the end of his wilderness wanderings, encounters the alewife Siduri on the shore of the sea that Gilgamesh must cross in order to reach the dwelling place of Utnapishtim and his wife. Before he crosses the sea, Gilgamesh and Siduri speak, he telling her of his great grief on account of the loss of Enkidu and of his fears regarding his own death that Enkidu's demise has engendered. Siduri in response urges Gilgamesh to abandon his futile quest for eternal life and to replace it with the pleasures that can be found in good food, good company, clean clothes, a well-bathed body, children, and a wife.

For our purposes the most satisfactory analysis of this passage currently available is provided by Gary A. Anderson, who notes how carefully Siduri's speech is structured in order to urge Gilgamesh to abandon at long last the mourning behaviors he embraced after Enkidu's death.¹⁹ The alewife says (Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment, col. iii, lines 1–14):

Gilgamesh, where do you rove?
The life you seek, you shall not find.
When the gods created humanity,
They established death for humans,
Life they took into their own hands.
You, Gilgamesh, may your belly be full,
Day and night, rejoice continually.
Daily make a joyous feast,

Day and night, dance and play.
May your garments be made clean,
May your head be washed, may you be bathed in water.
Look to the little one who holds your hand,
May your spouse rejoice continuously in your lap.
This is the fa[te of humankind].

As Anderson points out, the alewife's advice here, while often interpreted in terms of the philosophy of *carpe diem*, to seize the moment and live life to the fullest, is better understood in terms of Gilgamesh's mourning rituals: Gilgamesh, who has been lamenting, is now urged to rejoice; instead of wearing the rags in which mourners are typically attired (cf. biblical sackcloth), he is urged to don clean clothes; instead of keeping himself in the mourner's typically unkempt state, he is urged to bathe and wash his hair. He is also urged to eat festal meals and to engage in sexual relations with a wife (which is the implied meaning of the passage's penultimate line), whereas mourners in ancient Near Eastern tradition typically fasted and abstained from sexual intercourse. In Anderson's understanding, that is, Gilgamesh is urged to reaggregate or reintegrate himself into society by reversing the liminal rituals of mourning and returning to the normal and normative behaviors of Mesopotamian society.

Anderson, in my opinion, has brilliantly identified some of the key principles that should guide our interpretation of Siduri's speech.²⁰ In addition, I believe he has correctly summarized the key message Siduri tries to teach Gilgamesh, that "the only life he can attain is a life lived within the human community."²¹ Still, I suggest we can push somewhat further in our analysis, for in the typical rite of passage, especially as originally defined by van Gennep, the reaggregated subject does not return to his society in the same position in which he left but reenters with a new status and with a new set of responsibilities and obligations. The alewife's advice to Gilgamesh about a spouse and a child are crucial to note in this regard, for, while we have previously seen a Gilgamesh who rejoices, wears clean clothes, bathes, and washes his hair (at the beginning of Tablet VI, for example, after Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's return from their battle against Huwawa/Humbaba), marriage and family are not aspects of human existence that seem previously to have been a part of the life of Gilgamesh.²² Rather, Gilgamesh, according to the Epic, has previously enjoyed sexual relations only outside of marriage, with brides to be in Uruk before they were bedded by their husbands and possibly, to return to Jacobsen's late 1920s analysis, through his harassing of Uruk's young men and young women. Gilgamesh, moreover, shuns the offer of marriage Ishtar extends to him in Tablet VI. What the

alewife tells Gilgamesh, therefore, in urging him to leave the liminal phase of his rite-of-passage experience behind, is that he should reengage with his society in a way that does more than just reverse the mourning behaviors that have separated him from his fellows. He should reengage in a way that marks the changes his rite of passage has engendered and thus reengage as one who now embraces rather than rejects the institutions of marriage and family as two of the primary social structures of his community.²³

Reaggregation in the Standard Version of the Epic

Focusing on the end of Gilgamesh's liminal period, and on the reaggregation or reintegration that should follow, in addition helps explain some aspects of the concluding tablet of the Epic's Standard version (by which I mean Tablet XI; as discussed in [chapter 2](#), I agree with those commentators who see Tablet XII as a secondary and inorganic appendage to the Standard version's original text). In [chapter 4](#) I have discussed some aspects of Tablet XI in relationship to the Epic's liminal imagery: how, for example, Gilgamesh, in the course of his visit to Utnapishtim, receives from Utnapishtim the sort of revelation regarding matters divine that is typical of the liminal experience, both Utnapishtim's revelation regarding the theretofore secret and hidden story of the flood and Utnapishtim's revelation regarding the secret Plant of Rejuvenation, which would allow Gilgamesh to enjoy eternal youth. In revealing this secret lore, Utnapishtim, as I have previously suggested, plays the role typically assumed by ritual leaders in the liminal stage of rites of passage, and he also plays the role ritual leaders typically play in this liminal stage by imposing on Gilgamesh yet another in the series of onerous ordeals he has had to face: the test of staying awake six days and seven nights.

In undertaking this ordeal of staying awake for a week, however, Gilgamesh, for the first time in his cycle of tests and trials, fails. I would suggest that this is quite significant in terms of the analysis I have been developing and that it indicates, to use Turner's words, that Gilgamesh has been so "ground down" by his liminal experiences—that is, by his ordeals, his fears, his statuslessness, and his wandering—that he is now almost ready to be "fashioned anew" and "endowed with additional powers to cope with [his] new station in life."²⁴ He is now almost ready, that is, to be endowed with the new rights and responsibilities that come with the end of liminality and then to be reaggregated or reintegrated into his society. But when will this moment actually happen? It might at first seem, according at least to the Standard version (the Old Babylonian version, recall, seems to have ended shortly after Gilgamesh wakes up from his weeklong

sleep),²⁵ that the acquisition of the additional powers the rites-of-passage model leads us to expect is to come from the magical Plant of Rejuvenation that Gilgamesh, after failing the weeklong ordeal of sleeplessness, is exhorted to seek out. But it turns out, of course, that the Plant is not the instrument that will bestow a new status on Gilgamesh, for while Gilgamesh does manage with great difficulty (another typically liminal ordeal) to secure this plant from its habitat at the bottom of the sea, a serpent comes upon it and carries it off before the hero has a chance to eat it. The chance the Plant offered Gilgamesh of some sort of everlasting youth is lost.

Yet even though the rebirth promised by the Plant of Rejuvenation is lost to him, it is still at this point in the Standard version of the Epic—when this last failure has arguably ground Gilgamesh down one final notch—that our hero comes to realize the additional powers he needs in order to be reaggregated into his community and to assume whatever new station in life is appropriate to this reaggregated state. Thus Gilgamesh finally realizes what he has failed to apprehend ever since Enkidu's death, that he cannot achieve immortality. Still, he comes to appreciate that there are other means through which he can claim some form of eternal life: according to the Standard version, by creating great monuments of civilization (walls, temples, great works of literature). Armed with this realization (dare I say revelation?), he is ready to reassume his place in his community as king, and now a king of a quite different sort than the reckless and irresponsible leader he was before.

Note, moreover, how integrally linked, according to Turner's theory, these two aspects of Gilgamesh's experiences at the end of Tablet XI are, his being utterly ground down by all the challenges of the liminal experience that he has faced and his finally realizing the knowledge he needs to succeed in his reaggregated or reintegrated state. In writing about this aspect of Turner's work, his widow Edith Turner, along with two other colleagues, observes, "Because rites of passage occur at great moments of anxiety (life crises) and because they even provoke anxiety by vividly calling attention to irresolvable human paradoxes, they provide an atmosphere in which the neophyte is rendered most susceptible to learning."²⁶ We can easily see how these comments apply to Gilgamesh by the end of Tablet XI. He has been experiencing anxiety over his inevitable death ever since he was confronted with the loss of Enkidu. He now experiences a particularly heightened anxiety in having lost his last chances at some sort of eternal youth and immortal life. In addition, his time with Utnapishtim and the subsequent loss of the Plant of Rejuvenation have vividly called his attention to what is for him an irresolvable paradox: that, even though he is two-thirds god to one-third human, it is his human third that controls his

destiny, so that, like a human, he will die. It is at this crucial moment, when he is in his greatest state of vulnerability, that, according to a rites-of-passage analysis, Gilgamesh is rendered most susceptible to learning and so can finally apprehend what so many in the course of his journey have tried without success to tell him: that the eternal life he seeks he will not find.

To quote again Edith Turner and her colleagues regarding liminal entities, “Previous acts of acting, thinking, and feeling are stripped away. Thus cut off from their usual ways of apprehending the world—their routines and their customary ways of communicating—they are placed in a highly suggestible state for learning.”²⁷ So can Gilgamesh, once all is stripped away, finally learn what has eluded him since Enkidu’s demise and find a means of being “at peace” (Tablet I, line 7) with “the basic truths of the human condition.”²⁸ He is then ready to be reintegrated into his society.

Reaggregation in the Old Babylonian and the Standard Versions of the Epic Compared: The Reaggregation of Gilgamesh

It is important to observe here, however, that while the Old Babylonian version of the Epic, at least as it is represented in Siduri’s speech, and Tablet XI of the Standard version agree regarding “the basic truths of the human condition” that Gilgamesh must apprehend—the futility of his quest for eternal life and the fact of his own mortality—they seem to disagree regarding the means by which he is to find peace in this apprehension. Admittedly, we cannot make such a claim with absolute certainty on account of the fragmentary nature of the Old Babylonian version as it has come down to us. The Old Babylonian text as we have it breaks off in the midst of Gilgamesh’s encounter with the ferryman Sursunabu (later Urshanabi), before Gilgamesh even meets Utnapishtim and certainly before he is confronted with the disappointing news that Utnapishtim has to tell him and before his failure to pass the test requiring weeklong wakefulness. As I have previously indicated, however, commentators generally agree that the Old Babylonian contained at least some elements from the Sumero-Akkadian story of the flood and also contained the story of Gilgamesh’s abortive attempt to stay awake for six days and seven nights and the hero’s realization regarding his own mortality that stemmed from that failure.²⁹

“But how did he react to this discovery?” William L. Moran asks. “Did he return to Uruk, frustrated and embittered, a broken and tragic figure? Or did he, as in the later Standard Version ... recover some sense of purpose, of human goals, and of the satisfaction of human achievement?” Moran concludes: “At present, these are questions for

which there are no sure answers.”³⁰ Still, in the Old Babylonian version, at least as it is represented in Siduri’s speech, Gilgamesh is urged to find a measure of comfort in human sociability as manifest in marriage and family. The Old Babylonian version might further be interpreted to imply (although it does not specifically say this) that there is a sort of immortality to be had via one’s descendants.³¹ Yet even if this reads too much into the Old Babylonian, it nevertheless seems clear that Siduri’s speech in the Old Babylonian presents a different strategy regarding Gilgamesh’s potential reintegration into the human community than does Tablet XI in the Standard version, which mentions family not at all. Rather, it advocates that Gilgamesh find a measure of comfort by realizing there is an immortality to be had in creating great monuments of human civilization.³²

Such a conclusion can help explain why Siduri’s speech to Gilgamesh, although arguably one of the most magnificent pieces of poetry in Mesopotamian literature, is dropped in the Epic’s Standard version.³³ To be sure, part of the reason the Standard version drops the speech is probably somewhat pedestrian, as it is generally the Standard version’s tendency to homogenize texts that are more distinguished in the Old Babylonian. Recall, for example, that the Standard version homogenizes the two distinctive meteor-dream and axe-dream accounts that were found in the Old Babylonian, so that the language of Gilgamesh “loving” the metaphorical Enkidu “like a wife” and “caressing” him that was found in the Old Babylonian *only* in the axe-dream account is incorporated in the Standard version into *both* the meteor-dream and axe-dream passages.³⁴ Likewise, as Tigay has meticulously demonstrated, the Standard version thoroughly reformulates the conversations Gilgamesh has with the characters he meets, according to the Old Babylonian version, at the end of the world—Shamash, Siduri, Sursunabu (later Urshanabi), and presumably Utnapishtim—so that a substantial “degree of conformity” is imposed on “the varying dialogues of the Old Babylonian version.”³⁵

Yet although Tigay further shows that “at least some elements” of the uniform dialogues of the Standard version are derived from “the separate dialogues of the Old Babylonian version,” he does not attempt to explain why, in its reworking of the Old Babylonian, the Standard version chooses to adopt the elements it does and to reject others, including the object of my interest here, Siduri’s speech urging Gilgamesh to leave his mourning behaviors behind.³⁶ If, though, we understand that Siduri’s speech suggests a reintegrative strategy for the liminal Gilgamesh that is different from the reintegrative strategy that the Standard version advocates, then we can easily understand why neither this speech nor elements from it were employed in the Standard version’s revision. The Standard version, that is, while

accepting the larger thematic point of Siduri's speech in the Old Babylonian—that the quest for immortal life is futile—puts forward a different model than the Old Babylonian regarding the aspects of mortal existence in which Gilgamesh should find fulfillment: the great works of civilization versus marriage and family. The Standard version thus deletes Siduri's speech, however magnificent it may be, as contrary to the picture of Gilgamesh's reintegrated life that it seeks to describe.³⁷

Reaggregation in the Old Babylonian and the Standard Versions of the Epic Compared: Reaggregation for the Rest of Us

One final caveat is necessary before we conclude this discussion of reaggregation, which is that the stress I have placed in my just concluded comments on the different reintegrative strategies the Old Babylonian and Standard versions advocate for *Gilgamesh* as he nears the end of his liminal experiences is important. This is because the Standard version, while it seems to reject the Old Babylonian notion that Gilgamesh should embrace institutions of human society and sociability as a means of reintegrating with his community, does not appear to reject the value of Siduri's advice altogether. Rather, in Tablet VII, in Enkidu's deathbed scene, the Standard version seems to quote the sun god Shamash with approval when he chides Enkidu for cursing the harlot Shamhat because it was she who brought him into the world of human existence and consequently into the world of human mortality. As both Anderson and Tigay astutely note, Shamash, who counters Enkidu's curses by citing for Enkidu all that Shamhat's civilizing acts have allowed him to enjoy, specifically lists the same sorts of things in which Siduri in the Old Babylonian version urges Gilgamesh to find comfort (Tablet VII, lines 133–136).³⁸ These include good food ("bread worthy of the gods"), good drink ("ale worthy of kings"), fine clothes ("a splendid garment"), and, most important, good company ("the handsome Gilgamesh for a companion").

Shamash in this Standard version passage, that is, argues to Enkidu that the same sort of pleasure Siduri urges upon Gilgamesh in the Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment is "what constitutes life" and that "enjoyment of these luxuries, even for the short span of a person's existence, makes the mortal life worth living."³⁹ By extension, we can understand the Standard version as presenting that argument to us, the Epic's audience, in Tablet VII,⁴⁰ even as it seems to offer a different sense in Tablet XI of how Gilgamesh is to find peace within the confines of human existence. Perhaps we can explain this difference by appeal yet again to rites-of-passage imagery, in particular, to the nature of status and markers of rank that are found

outside liminal time and space? For us, the Epic's audience, these status and markers of rank are, like Enkidu's, fairly minimal: we are not animals, but human, and maybe even, by virtue of our intelligence and civilized nature, a little like the gods.⁴¹ As such, we should be satisfied by those fruits of civilization our intelligence has created for us to enjoy, such as cooked food, fermented drink, finely made clothing, and the institutions of friendship, marriage, and family, for it is through these things we partake of divinity as much as is possible within the realm of mere mortals. Crucial to recall in this regard is that Enkidu is described as "like a god" immediately after he sleeps with Shamhat and begins his journey toward the civilized life in Tablet I, the implication being that it is through embracing the pleasures of civilization that Enkidu in particular and thus humans in general can approach the lives enjoyed by the divine (Tablet I, line 190; cf. the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. ii, line 11).⁴²

Gilgamesh, however, is not like humans in general, and, outside of liminal time and space, he is not like Enkidu in particular. He is rather king, and, for one of such exalted rank, the Standard version may imply that the life in human community in which ordinary individuals are to find contentment just will not do. Kings, as Tigay points out, are said in Mesopotamian tradition to be in "the image of god" not only because they share, like all of us, in the gods' intelligence and civilized nature, but because they partake of the same majesty as do the immortals.⁴³ They therefore may require for their contentment, as the Standard version sees it, far more majestic exemplars of the intelligent and civilized life than do the rest of us; they may require, as the Standard version's prologue would have it, the satisfaction of knowing they have built great walls, erected great temples, and produced great works of literature. This must be especially true for a king like Gilgamesh. He is, recall, "the greatest among kings" (Tablet I, line 27); indeed, he is two-thirds divine and one-third human. He thus represents, as opposed even to other kings and certainly as opposed to the rest of us, "an extraordinary level of potential and aspiration."⁴⁴ As such, this larger-than-life Gilgamesh may need larger-than-life ways of finding contentment as he seeks peace within the limitations that mortal existence imposes upon human beings. Consequently the Standard version advocates for him, in both its prologue and in Tablet XI, that he look beyond the relatively simple pleasures of human society and sociability that will suffice for Enkidu and for the rest of us in order to create much grander and more monumental artifacts of human ingenuity.

As Tigay writes about Siduri's speech in the Old Babylonian version, "What the barmaid offers Gilgamesh is a conventional philosophy of life." But while the Old Babylonian seems to believe, again in the words

of Tigay, that this is something “of which Gilgamesh sorely needs to be reminded,”⁴⁵ the Standard version suggests that this conventional philosophy does not suffice for Gilgamesh but only for more humble mortals such as Enkidu and the Epic’s audience. To put the matter in terms once more of our rites-of-passage analysis: in the Epic of Gilgamesh, once the basic truths of human existence are realized and reintegration begins, status—so absent during the liminal period of a rite of passage—matters. According, moreover, to the Standard version, it seems to matter in terms of describing how successful reintegration is to be realized, so those of us with the average status of an Enkidu will be able to make our peace with the human condition in fairly modest ways, whereas those of Gilgamesh’s superior rank will find they must achieve peace through more extraordinary efforts.⁴⁶

Liminal Women: Shamhat, Siduri, Ishtar, and Utnapishtim’s Wife

At several points in his writings, Turner suggests that women, by reason of their positions of status inferiority and marginality within society, are quintessentially liminal; also that women, as quintessentially liminal beings, can help generate for others the liminal experience of *communitas*.⁴⁷ In her important study of Turner’s theories of social drama and liminality, and their applicability to women’s stories and women’s symbols from the Western European Middle Ages, Caroline Walker Bynum agrees, or at least agrees that in the medieval hagiographies she examines women in general are depicted by their male biographers as standing outside the medieval world’s primary social structures and that women saints in particular are understood to represent for men what it was to “retreat from the world into inner, often mystical repose.” As such, these women helped engender men’s movement into and, ultimately, out of a similarly constituted space, thus providing, in Bynum’s words, “a means of escape from and reintegration into” men’s normal experience of status and power.⁴⁸ In making this argument, Bynum tempers Turner’s tendency to universalize his theories of liminality in two important ways, first, by insisting that Turner’s impulse to describe *all* women as liminal and able to facilitate liminal *communitas* must be evaluated against an individual culture’s understanding of women’s position and status in relation to the normative social order. Second, and more important, Bynum demonstrates that, even in cultures where a description of women as liminal does seem to apply, it is a description that applies only insofar as one “stands with the dominant group

(males) and sees women ... as liminal to men.”⁴⁹ “Women’s lives,” however, “are not liminal to women,” because, Bynum theorizes, Turner’s description of liminality as a structureless status that stands as a temporary antithesis to “the weight of social structure and responsibility” does not well conform to the actual experiences of women, in medieval society and in many other cultures, for whom structurelessness is not a “phase” but more typically a lifetime norm.⁵⁰

The distance is vast, of course, between the Middle Ages of Western Europe and Mesopotamia of the second and first millennia BCE, and we must take very seriously Bynum’s cautions about applying either Turner’s insights or, by implication, hers across all cultures and transhistorically. Still, Bynum’s sense that the women saints she studies are typically portrayed by their male biographers as liminal and are therefore perceived as especially able to propel men’s movements into and out of a liminal experience will prove to be highly suggestive in our examination of women characters in the Gilgamesh Epic. As we will see, women characters in the Gilgamesh tradition repeatedly are described by the Epic’s assuredly male authors and redactors as critical players in the movement of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in and out of liminal time and space. But not all women: Gilgamesh’s mother, Ninsun, is an important exception. Bynum’s analysis may again provide an explanation, given her suggestion that the experience of antistructure that is liminality really only makes sense to those individuals who “in a special sense *are* the structures,” that is, for the medieval period she describes and, for most societies (including ancient Mesopotamia), the male elite.⁵¹ The women who represent liminality to this segment of a population do so by representing everything they, as elite males, are not: powerless and without status. Neither of these adjectives, however, describes Gilgamesh’s mother, who is royal and also a goddess. Hence, according to the understanding Bynum has developed, Ninsun would not be particularly well positioned to effect Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s transformations with respect to liminal time and space. Other women, though—women who represent the relative powerlessness and lack of status more typical of women’s experience—should be positioned, according to Bynum, to enable Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s movements in and out of liminal existence.

Still, when I look at the women of Gilgamesh, it seems to me there is a little more going on than that for which Bynum’s insights allow, for I will argue below that there is at least one woman character in the Epic who, although powerful and of high status, is nevertheless associated with Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s “escape from and reintegration into” status and power. This is the goddess Ishtar. Yet as we will see, Ishtar, despite her powerful and high-status position within the Mesopotamian

cosmos, is marked by the tradition as liminal in some other crucial ways. What I hope therefore to demonstrate is that the women in the Epic of Gilgamesh who are particularly able to do the work of moving Gilgamesh and Enkidu in and out of the Epic's liminal phases are able to do so not only because they, like almost all Mesopotamian women, are liminal from the point of view of the Epic's male authors but also because they are *especially* liminal women, women who live, for example, not just a woman's typically marginal existence, but a life on the extreme margins of society (the prostitute Shamhat), or women who manifest a extremely exaggerated form of a liminal being's betwixt-and-between identity (the human yet immortal wife of Utnapishtim). In all, I will examine the liminal nature of four of the Epic's women characters: the prostitute Shamhat as she is described in the Standard version's Tablets I and II and in the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, the alewife Siduri as presented in the Standard version's Tablet X and the Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment, the goddess Ishtar as depicted in the Standard version's Tablet VI, and the portrayal found in the Standard version's Tablet XI of Utnapishtim's wife.

The Prostitute Shamhat

Almost all commentators have suggested that the role Shamhat plays in the acculturation of Enkidu in the opening tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh is pivotal, since it is immediately after Shamhat's and Enkidu's six days and seven night of uninterrupted lovemaking that Enkidu's animal nature leaves him ("Enkidu was diminished, he could not run as before"; Tablet I, line 184) and the transformation that makes him human begins ("he had grown in broad understanding"; Tablet I, line 185). As I have earlier intimated, this is an interpretation with which I by no means disagree, and I also by no means disagree with the analysis of Moran, which I cited in [chapter 4](#), who associates the profound transformation effected by Shamhat with rites-of-passage imagery that especially includes rituals of cleansing and clothing (Enkidu being anointed and donning his first human attire).⁵² What I would like to suggest here, however, is that combining these two sets of observations allows us to assign a heightened significance to Shamhat's role as a pivotal character. In my estimation she is particularly able to propel the admittedly already liminal Enkidu into what I have described as the fully liminal world of tests and trials, of divine revelation, and of egalitarian *communitas* that he experiences together with Gilgamesh because she, as a prostitute, is herself a highly liminal being and so especially able to bring about Enkidu's entry into the liminal phase of the Epic in which his interactions with

Gilgamesh take place.⁵³

That prostitutes are liminal characters has been noted by several scholars of the ancient Near Eastern world. Susan Niditch, for example, has written that as liminal entities generally are those who fall “betwixt and between neatly defined categories,” so does a prostitute according to ancient Near Eastern tradition fall “between the two allowable categories for women. She is neither an unmarried virgin, nor a non-virgin wife.” Yet, while for most women the prostitute’s participation in sexual intercourse outside the bounds of marriage would mean condemnation, Niditch argues that because the prostitute is in a certain sense officially recognized as liminal within her society, and thus acknowledged as an individual not constrained by the customs and conventions of the social order, she is tolerated. As Niditch writes, “In effect, one could fall between the proper categories and survive, once that outside betwixt-and-between status was itself institutionalized and categorized.”⁵⁴ Phyllis A. Bird similarly describes prostitution in Mesopotamia as a “tolerated liminal activity”⁵⁵ and has elsewhere tried to capture the ambiguous qualities that characterize the prostitute’s liminal nature by describing her using the paradoxical phrase “legal outlaw.”⁵⁶ As Bird suggests, the activity of the prostitute is something the society (at least as represented by its male members) feels is needed and even desired, and therefore the role of the prostitute is accommodated. But because the prostitute threatens the conventions of her society by “standing outside the normal social order and its approved roles for women,” she is nevertheless “ostracized and marginalized” with “a stigma ... always attached to her role and her person.”⁵⁷

Bird further suggests that there is a stigma attached to the fact that the prostitute controls the financial transactions in which she engages with her clients, something that again stands outside the normal social order in the ancient Near Eastern world, where financial transactions are typically controlled by men.⁵⁸ According to Bird, moreover, the prostitute even lives on the outskirts of a city, her very place within urban geography demarcating, to use Bird’s terminology, her “marginal” character.⁵⁹ This aspect of a prostitute’s existence may be indicated in the Gilgamesh Epic in Tablet VII, in which Enkidu, among the curses he heaps upon Shamhat, says, “May the shadow of the city walls be where you stand!” (line 117).

The curses of Shamhat that Enkidu utters are interesting to us for another reason, which is that they are similar to the curses that the goddess Ereshkigal, the queen of the netherworld, utters against an *assinnu* who has been sent to petition her in the myth of Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld.⁶⁰ Ereshkigal, for example, begins her tirade against the *assinnu* by claiming she will curse him with a great

curse, just as Enkidu opens his invective against Shamhat by saying, “Let me curse you with a great curse” (Tablet VII, line 102). Also, both Ereshkigal and Enkidu denounce the objects of their disdain by saying, “May the drunkard and the thirsty strike your cheek” (Tablet VII, line 119). Finally, as Enkidu says of Shamhat, Ereshkigal expresses hope that the *assinnu* will find a place to stand only on the outskirts of the city, under the shadow of its walls. These parallels are significant for our purposes because of the similarities they posit between Shamhat and the *assinnu*, a cult functionary of Ishtar who, as I described above, is well characterized as liminal. This confirms what I have already suggested, that Shamhat as a prostitute is well understood as liminal too.

Shamhat is further, as I have in addition already suggested, understood to be a liminal figure who propels Enkidu into a world of liminal engagement with Gilgamesh. Indeed, her very first words to Enkidu, which are spoken after their weeklong bout of lovemaking is completed, urge Enkidu to go to Uruk to meet Gilgamesh (Tablet I, lines 192–195; see too the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. ii, lines 14–23). Crucial to notice here is that the idea Enkidu might go to Uruk and engage with Gilgamesh after being “tamed” by Shamhat is *never* part of the original plan that brought the prostitute into the wilderness. Rather, the huntsman’s father, who is the one who originally proposed that the huntsman ask Gilgamesh for a prostitute to seduce Enkidu, suggests she entice Enkidu only because he knows the seduction will break Enkidu’s bond with the wild beasts and so end Enkidu’s abetting of his animal companions through his disabling of the huntsman’s snares. Gilgamesh, too, when he responds to the huntsman’s appeal by sending Shamhat into the countryside, does so only with the intent of distracting Enkidu from his attacks against the huntsman’s livelihood; there is never any mention that the huntsman might send the subdued Enkidu back to Uruk for Gilgamesh to encounter. This idea instead is unique to Shamhat, and the fact that she expresses it in the first words she speaks to Enkidu suggests it has a special significance. Once again, I propose its significance is that Shamhat as an exceptionally liminal character is particularly well positioned, from the narrative’s perspective, to effect Enkidu’s movement into the world of liminal time and space in which his interactions with Gilgamesh will take place. In fact, we might say that *only* a liminal character like Shamhat can effect Enkidu’s movement into liminal time and space, as opposed to, say, the huntsman’s father, who seems oblivious to this possibility.

Several scholars have commented on how similar Shamhat is structurally to the alewife Siduri. Rivkah Harris points out, for example, that both Shamhat and Siduri are working women who support themselves, that both function within the extradomestic domain of Mesopotamian society, and that both are engaged in professions that were important in the leisure activities of Mesopotamian men. Taverns such as Siduri is depicted as managing, moreover, were places where men went to meet prostitutes like Shamhat, and thus taverns were accommodated yet stigmatized in some of the same ways in Mesopotamian society that prostitution was accommodated yet stigmatized.⁶¹ Tzvi Abusch adds that as Shamhat sought to humanize the animalistic Enkidu in the early scenes of the Epic, so too toward the Epic's end, at least in the Old Babylonian version, does Siduri seek to rehumanize the animal-like and corpse-like Gilgamesh, by urging him to put his overwrought mourning behaviors aside. Indeed, Abusch notes that many of the specific features of human existence to which Shamhat originally introduced Enkidu are those later urged upon Gilgamesh by Siduri in the Old Babylonian account: a clean body, human clothing, and sex. Abusch follows up as well on an interpretation first put forward by Moran, who argues that the episode describing Enkidu's acculturation in the Gilgamesh Epic derives from an older story "of the humanization of a primitive by a prostitute that would have been told in the *aštammu*, 'tavern/inn,'" to which Abusch appends his own suggestion: that "Siduri's advice would also seem to derive from and have its setting in the *aštammu* or *bīt sābil/sābiti* [which means, like *aštammu*, 'tavern, inn']." "Through these and other connections," Abusch concludes, "the author links the Siduri-Gilgamesh encounter with the earlier Shamhat-Enkidu encounter and suggests that they parallel each other."⁶² This observation allows us in turn to conclude that, as the prostitute Shamhat is represented in the Epic as an exceptionally liminal figure, so too should the alewife Siduri be identified as highly liminal in nature.

Other evidence supports this interpretation. Dalley notes, for example, that alewives in Mesopotamia "lived outside the normal protection of male members of a family," which is the sort of position we now readily recognize as liminal.⁶³ Abusch in addition points out that Mesopotamian taverns served ritually "as a transition-point back to normal life for the patient who has undergone magical rites,"⁶⁴ which implies that those who kept taverns were themselves transitional figures. Abusch, moreover, follows Lambert in identifying Siduri as a goddess, "perhaps of the Ishtar type."⁶⁵ If this is so, however, then we must quickly note that, unlike Ishtar and the other gods, Siduri does not live in the heavens. Yet the otherworldly location in which Gilgamesh encounters her, on the shores of a cosmic sea, is surely

not the earthly domain of humans. Siduri, that is, lives in a locale betwixt and between the realms of gods and mortals, which suggests that, if she is a goddess, she is one who, like her more famous neighbors Utnapishtim and his wife, represents a betwixt-and-between or liminal sort of divinity.⁶⁶

Abusch further suggests that some version of the Gilgamesh Epic that predates the Old Babylonian text ended shortly after Gilgamesh's encounter with Siduri and did not include any of the Utnapishtim episode. As Abusch sees it, Gilgamesh, in this account, while wandering aimlessly, would have come across Siduri, who, after delivering her famous speech about the need for Gilgamesh to abandon his futile quest, would have concluded by advising "his immediate return home to Uruk and the resumption there of a normal life." The text then "may well have ended with Siduri sending Gilgamesh back to Uruk in the care of a boatman, perhaps Urshanabi."⁶⁷ Were this hypothesis to hold, it would suggest still more of the structural parallels between Shamhat and Siduri that were so significant for our analysis above, for as Shamhat effected Enkidu's movement out of the wilderness where he was born and toward the city of Uruk, so too would Siduri have effected the end of Gilgamesh's wilderness wanderings and his journey back toward Uruk. As Shamhat, moreover, in effecting Enkidu's movement toward Uruk, propelled him into the liminal time and space that are represented in the stories of his interactions with Gilgamesh, so analogously would Siduri, in effecting Gilgamesh's return to Uruk, be propelling him out of the liminal time and space that have defined his existence since shortly after he and Enkidu met. We could then further propose that the reason Siduri, like Shamhat, is particularly able to effect a hero's transformation with respect to liminal time and space is that Siduri, like Shamhat, is a highly liminal figure.⁶⁸

Yet even if Abusch's reconstruction cannot be sustained (and he himself notes it is speculative),⁶⁹ the basic fact of Siduri's liminal nature remains, and I believe that this is a significant feature of the Epic, even in the Standard version, in which Siduri's role is greatly downplayed. As I intimated already in [chapter 4](#), even in the Standard version Siduri as a liminal figure serves, as do the theriomorphic scorpion-men and Utnapishtim and his wife, as an ideal representative of all the aspects of liminality Gilgamesh has experienced and is experiencing at the point in the Epic at which she appears: the liminal lands in which Gilgamesh has wandered; the liminal tests and trials Gilgamesh has endured; and the liminal identity Gilgamesh manifests. As Gilgamesh lives betwixt and between worlds, that is, he appropriately interacts with other betwixt-and-between characters, and even in her downplayed role in the Standard version Siduri functions

as one of those beings. In the Old Babylonian, of course, she is more, a liminal being who, I would argue, uses her liminal position to try and move Gilgamesh out of his liminal existence and into a reaggregated life. If Abusch is correct, she may even have succeeded in this essay in some still older version of the Epic, her liminal nature, as I would interpret, the instrument that makes her particularly able to effect this sort of transition.

The Goddess Ishtar

In an essay entitled “Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic,” Rivkah Harris quotes a hymnic passage in which the goddess Ishtar sings of herself, “When I sit at the entrance of the tavern, I am a loving prostitute,”⁷⁰ and then correctly notes that this passage suggests some association between the prostitute Shamhat, the tavern keeper Siduri, and the goddess Ishtar, who plays such a large role in Tablet VI of the Gilgamesh Epic. This is indicated by other evidence as well. Ishtar, for example, is the patron of prostitutes within Mesopotamian tradition, including the subcategory of prostitutes known as the *šamhātu*, or “shamhat-prostitutes,” who in the Epic of Gilgamesh give Shamhat her name (Tablet VI, line 162). Also, in several god lists, the name Siduri occurs as a name of Ishtar.⁷¹ These data linking Shamhat, Siduri, and Ishtar intimate, in terms of our analysis, that Ishtar, like Shamhat and Siduri, is to be understood in certain respects as liminal. Indeed, in a second article, “Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites,” Harris makes precisely this point. In Harris’s words, Ishtar, “represented both order and disorder, structure and anti-structure. In her psychological traits and behavior she confounded and confused normative categories and boundaries.” Later, in the same essay, Harris, quoting Turner, specifically identifies the goddess as “liminal,” one who, as a goddess of love and sexuality but of war as well, is represented in ways both benign and horrific. To illustrate more fully, Harris cites two texts in particular. The first lists several aspects of existence that are said to fall in the domain of Ishtar: to destroy and to tear up, yet to build up and to settle; business savvy and great winnings, yet financial loss and deficit; slander and hostile words, yet joking and smiling. The second text speaks of Ishtar as the one who has “thrown into confusion threads which have been ordered,” yet simultaneously as the one who has “organize[d] those threads which bring confusion.” As Harris says, these are “vivid expressions of the goddess’s innate contradictions.”⁷²

Of the examples of Ishtar’s contradictory nature that Harris cites from the Epic of Gilgamesh, the first is less than convincing: that the goddess is depicted as compassionate and maternal in Tablet XI,

when Utnapishtim recounts how she cried out “like a woman in travail” because of her distress over the destruction of humanity in the flood, yet appears lusty and aggressive in Tablet VI, when she propositions Gilgamesh, and, once spurned, is represented as vindictive and vengeful.⁷³ Because, however, Tablet XI’s flood story seems so wooden and mechanical an addition to the Epic,⁷⁴ it is difficult to see in its juxtaposition with Tablet VI significant evidence of the narrative’s appreciation of Ishtar’s liminal nature. Others of Harris’s observations, though, are more germane. She points out, for example, that Ishtar, in proposing marriage to Gilgamesh in Tablet VI, assumes a masculine rather than feminine role; that Gilgamesh, in rejecting her, and in the most scathing and insulting of terms, treats her as if she were a low-status mortal rather than a deity; and that the specific episodes of her past he details in his rejection, describing her affairs with both animals (the *allallu* bird, the lion, and the horse) and mortals (the shepherd and Ishullanu, the gardener), indicate her tendency to blur the boundaries of the divine, human, and natural worlds.⁷⁵ Harris finally notes that, although Ishtar “has a special relationship with kings that extends from early times, down to Ashurbanipal, the last Assyrian king,” she is at the same time “the patroness of prostitutes, those who belong to the fringes of society ... its marginal members.”⁷⁶ In the Gilgamesh Epic this is indicated by the fact that Ishtar in Tablet VI first seeks an association with Gilgamesh, the king, yet subsequently, after Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the Bull of Heaven that is the instrument of her revenge, calls upon her entourage of “courtesans, prostitutes, and harlots” to mourn the Bull’s death (Tablet VI, line 161–162).

As I have suggested above regarding Shamhat and Siduri, I would propose that because of Ishtar’s generally liminal nature, the Epic associates her with its heroes’ movement in and out of liminal time and space. Crucial to recall here is that, as I have interpreted at least the Standard version (the Tablet VI materials are not represented in the Old Babylonian and may not even have been a part of that corpus),⁷⁷ there seems to be a brief movement toward Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s reaggregation or reintegration into Uruk’s community at the beginning of Tablet VI, when the two heroes return successful from their expedition against Huwawa/Humbaba and Gilgamesh bathes and reclothes himself in his royal robes and so apparently resumes his position as king.⁷⁸ But almost immediately, there is, to use Turner’s language, another “breach of regular, norm-governed social relations”—Gilgamesh’s rejecting of Ishtar’s proposal of marriage, and in the most insulting of terms—which provokes the sending of the Bull of Heaven and throws the narrative back into a liminal phase.⁷⁹ The scene of Ishtar’s proposition is thus pivotal in terms of the narrative’s movement in and out of liminal time and space,⁸⁰ as was the scene of

Enkidu's humanization by the prostitute Shamhat and, perhaps, the scene in the Old Babylonian version and its potential precursors in which the alewife Siduri counsels Gilgamesh to abandon his futile wanderings. The liminally characterized Ishtar, in short, helps propel movement with respect to liminal time and space in much the same way that the liminally characterized Shamhat and, possibly, Siduri are able to do. The imagery that surrounds this Ishtar-related transition, moreover, is identical to the imagery that surrounds the transition effected by Shamhat and, at a minimum, proposed by Siduri: cleansing, clothing, and sex.

And there is yet more, for Abusch has provided a stimulating reading of Ishtar's propositioning of Gilgamesh that can help us understand why her offer so provokes a crisis in "norm-governed social relations." As he suggests, the marriage Ishtar proposes seems ostensibly to be a form of the sacred marriage that I described in [chapter 3](#), in which the king of a Sumerian city-state engages in ritual intercourse with a priestess representing the goddess Ishtar. But, as Abusch sees it, the union Ishtar proposes to Gilgamesh is not actually "a normal or even sacred marriage" at all.⁸¹ It is rather a proposal to Gilgamesh to become a functionary in the netherworld: "Gilgamesh the king will wed Ishtar and go to his new home, the tomb, the netherworld; there he will be accorded the rites of the dead and exercise his infernal powers."⁸² I will not try to reproduce here the extensive evidence Abusch musters in support of this thesis; what is crucial for our purposes is his sense that the marriage Ishtar offers is not "normal" and also his sense that in ostensibly offering the sacred marriage, which Abusch associates with fertility and life,⁸³ while actually offering a marriage that represents sterility and death, there is a "purposeful ambiguity" to Ishtar's proposal.⁸⁴ The proffered marriage, that is, is "neither here nor there"; it stands antithetical to that which is "arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."⁸⁵ These last quotes are, of course, from Turner, defining what is liminal, my point here being that the very ambiguous, non-normative, or liminal marriage that Ishtar offers Gilgamesh is part and parcel of, and needs to be understood in the context of, the movement back into liminal time and space that Gilgamesh's encounter with the goddess brings about.⁸⁶ In this respect Ishtar is very like the prostitute Shamhat (of whom, she is, after all, the patron goddess), as her proposal to engage, as did Shamhat with Enkidu, in a non-normative yet marriagelike relationship with Gilgamesh propels him into a liminal existence.⁸⁷

Utnapishtim's Wife

The pivotal roles played by the women Shamhat, Siduri, and Ishtar in

the Epic of Gilgamesh leads me to suspect that we need to pay more attention, in the Standard version, to another woman, Utnapishtim's wife, and especially to the role she may play in bringing about Gilgamesh's ultimate return to Uruk. As I have already indicated, this woman, like all the other women I have described, is surely liminal, defined in terms of a betwixt-and-between identity (a mortal who became immortal) and living in the betwixt-and-between space (neither the heavenly abode of the gods nor the earthly domain of humans). She also, it might be argued, provides some of the crucial impetus of getting Gilgamesh back to Uruk.⁸⁸ Particularly significant here is the scene in the Standard version's Tablet XI, in which Gilgamesh tries to stay awake for six days and seven nights yet immediately falls into a "sleep like a fog" (Tablet XI, lines 209 and 212). Upon witnessing this, Utnapishtim speaks scornfully to his wife about Gilgamesh's failure. But he says nothing about what he plans to do with the somnolent Gilgamesh, so that, for all the Epic tells us, Utnapishtim could be planning to let Gilgamesh lie comatose forever. It is only Utnapishtim's *wife* who urges that he be awoken, and that he be awoken, significantly, so that he might "go back on the way that he came in well-being" (Tablet XI, line 215).

In addition, Utnapishtim's wife urges Utnapishtim to tell Gilgamesh, after he is awakened, about the Plant of Rejuvenation; otherwise, Utnapishtim might again, for all the Epic tells us, have done nothing. To be sure, the knowledge of the Plant of Rejuvenation becomes a bittersweet gift, as Gilgamesh claims the Plant only to lose it to the serpent, but it is nevertheless, in the Standard version account, a gift that finally forces Gilgamesh to acknowledge the basic truths of human existence that have theretofore eluded him. Utnapishtim's wife, that is, does much more in the Standard version than commentators usually acknowledge to bring about the resolution of Gilgamesh's angst-ridden existence. Or, to speak in the terms of our analysis here, it is *she*, by making sure that Gilgamesh does not sleep forever and by prodding her husband to tell Gilgamesh of the Plant that inspires his ultimate realization of life's truths, who puts Gilgamesh in a position to move out of the liminal phase of his life story and be reaggregated or reincorporated into his community.

Moreover, although there is no sex involved (unless one finds an allusion to it deeply veiled, in the phallic image of the serpent), there are, in conjunction with this transition Utnapishtim's wife helps bring about, the same rites of cleaning and clothing that accompanied the transition of Enkidu effected by Shamhat and the transition in Tablet VI associated with Ishtar. Thus, immediately after Gilgamesh awakens from his week-long sleep, and just before he is told the secret of the Plant of Rejuvenation, he bathes and redons his royal robes. Bathing

and the donning of clean clothing are rites also urged upon Gilgamesh by the alewife Siduri within the Old Babylonian account as she seeks to effect his reintegration into Mesopotamian society. Indeed, it may be that as Siduri becomes downplayed in the Standard version, Utnapishtim's wife in some sense replaces her in her role as a liminal woman whose function in the narrative is to help move an epic hero out of his liminal existence. It may further be that the sexual motifs that are present in the Old Babylonian Siduri episode and present in conjunction with liminal women's roles elsewhere in the epic tradition are absent in relation to Utnapishtim's wife because of the observations I advanced earlier regarding the Standard version's concluding proposition, that marriage and family are insufficient paths to fulfillment in life for the reaggregated or reintegrated Gilgamesh.

Yet whatever the merits of these last points of speculation, it seems clear that we must view many of the Epic's women characters—Shamhat, Siduri, Ishtar, and Utnapishtim's wife—generally through the lens of liminality and see more specifically that these women's exceptionally liminal nature places them in an especially good position to move the Epic's two heroes in and out of liminal time and space. As such, these women function simultaneously as mirrors of the liminal imagery that predominates in the Epic's text and as crucial linchpins that facilitate the narrative's movement through the phases of the rites-of-passage model.

The Biblical Story of David and Jonathan



INTRODUCING DAVID



In my introductory chapter I described the way in which the David and Jonathan greeting card that I was sent by my former student problematically presumes that there is a basic continuity between the means by which same-sex erotic and sexual interactions are conceptualized in the ancient Near Eastern world and the means by which these sorts of interactions are understood in ours. In this chapter, as we turn to look at the David and Jonathan stories in more detail, I wish to begin by considering another problematic presupposition this greeting card assumes, which might in shorthand be called historicity. More specifically, the greeting card's text—by summarizing the biblical accounts of David and Jonathan and then immediately turning to speak of the time when “these events were recorded”—signals its assumptions that the tale it recounts actually happened and, more generally, that the biblical book of 1 Samuel, in which the stories of David and Jonathan occur, contains a basically accurate account of ancient Israelite history.¹ Biblical specialists, however, are almost unanimously agreed that such an exceptionally positivistic assessment cannot be correct. Still, questions concerning the precise degree of historicity that underlies the biblical accounts of David remain unanswered in contemporary scholarship. Thus, while here, as opposed to my discussion in [chapter 1](#), I might justifiably be accused of setting up my greeting card's exceptional positivism as a straw man, the larger issue the card raises does turn out to require consideration.

Let me be as clear as I can about my position: in raising doubts about the historical reliability of 1 Samuel and, by extension, doubts about the historical reliability of the books that directly precede and succeed 1 Samuel in the biblical corpus (Joshua, Judges, 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings), I do not mean to ally myself with the community of biblical scholars who have undertaken to produce what are sometimes called revisionist histories of biblical Israel.² As the noted archaeologist of ancient Israel William G. Dever has pointed out,³ these revisionist histories are not really histories at all, as the primary claim of their authors is that the Bible cannot in any sense be read as a historical

account. For example, two of the leading exponents of the revisionist position, Niels Peter Lemche and Thomas L. Thompson, write in a jointly authored article, “the Bible is not history,”⁴ and Thompson elsewhere has stated, “we don’t find the Bible to be a historical record.”⁵ Rather, according to Lemche, Thompson, and other revisionists, the biblical story is only that—a story. Moreover, in the revisionist account the biblical story is from the point of view of its own chronology a very late one, written during the Persian or Hellenistic periods (the late sixth through the second centuries BCE) and not during the Iron Age period of the twelfth to sixth centuries BCE that the books of Joshua–2 Kings in which we are interested here purport to describe.

More specifically, the revisionists argue that the biblical account that runs from Joshua through 2 Kings is a literary and theological fiction written during the Persian or Hellenistic periods and conceived of by its authors as an attempt to create for their Jewish contemporaries an inspirational tale of a glorious Israelite nation of many centuries past. According to the revisionists, the conclusion that follows is that there was never any such thing as the tribal-era and monarchic-era Israel that the Bible locates in the twelfth to sixth centuries BCE and depicts in Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings. Rather, in the revisionist understanding, the Bible’s portrayal of this Iron Age Israel is only an invention, an imaginary or even mythic conception projected backward in time by later tradition for ideological reasons.⁶ According, for example, to Lemche, “No matter how we twist the factual remains from ancient Palestine, we cannot have a biblical Israel that is at the same time the Israel of the Iron Age.”⁷ Thompson is blunter, “Biblical Israel was in its origin a Jewish [by which he means Hellenistic-era] concept,”⁸ and blunter still, “The Bible is not a history of anyone’s past.”⁹

For revisionist scholars, moreover, the tales the Bible tells of an early tenth-century BCE King David (ca. 1009–970 BCE), and the related stories of his eleventh-century BCE predecessor King Saul (ca. 1028–1009 BCE) and his mid-tenth-century BCE successor King Solomon (ca. 970–931 BCE), are prime exemplars of the larger literary fiction that they posit. Lemche and Thompson, for example, have stated, “The narratives about David in the Old Testament have little to do with history,”¹⁰ and Lemche has elsewhere claimed, “The David of the Bible, David the king, is not a historical figure.”¹¹ Lemche and Thompson have in addition made clear that their claims regarding David’s nonhistoricity go far beyond the concessions that almost all biblical scholars would grant regarding the biblical stories’ propensities toward overstatement and hyperbole. Instead, they assert:¹²

Our argument is not that the Bible exaggerates the exploits of David, nor is it that Solomon was never as rich as the Bible makes him out to be. We are not dealing with issues of skepticism here. Rather, we are trying to argue that the Bible's stories of Saul, David and Solomon are not about history at all.

Thompson elsewhere explains that he denies “the existence ... of a united monarchy [under David and Solomon] in the tenth century [BCE] —for a number of reasons.... Judah [the purported territorial center of the Davidic monarchy] had almost no settlement at this time. It begins to be settled around 850 to 800. Jerusalem [the purported capital city of David and Solomon] is not settled at all until around 900. We don't have a tenth-century Jerusalem.... Jerusalem becomes a really major town only after the destruction of [the major urban center] Lachish in 701 B.C.E.”¹³ In their jointly authored article, Lemche and Thompson similarly argue:¹⁴

In the history of Palestine we have presented, there is no room for a historical United Monarchy [that is, the monarchy of Saul, David, and Solomon], or for such kings as presented in the biblical stories of Saul, David, and Solomon. The early period in which the traditions have set their narrative is an imaginary world of long ago that never existed as such. In the real world of that time, for instance, only a few dozen villagers lived as farmers in the Judaeen highlands. Timber, grazing land and steppe were all marginal possibilities. There could not have been a kingdom for any Saul or David to be king of, simply because there were not enough people.

But this is not how I or many of the revisionists' critics would see it.¹⁵ Particularly crucial to consider in this regard are two fragments from an Aramaic stele discovered relatively recently at Tel Dan, in Israel's far north.¹⁶ One of these (Fragment A) mentions the “house of David” (*btdwd*, or [when read with vowels] *bēt dāwīd*), presumably, that is, the royal house that reigned in Jerusalem during the ninth century BCE, at the time of the stele's composition, and that traced its ancestry back to the tenth-century BCE King David.¹⁷ To be sure, the fact that a ninth-century BCE royal house traced its ancestry back to a tenth-century BCE King David cannot prove definitively that this tenth-century BCE David actually existed, but surely it indicates that a David tradition was extant in Israel well before the Persian or Hellenistic date that the revisionists propose for the beginnings of the David story. According to the revisionist account, however, the evidence of the Tel Dan stele is to be dismissed either as fraudulent (a forgery planted in the remains

at Tel Dan by someone attempting to play a joke on the excavators)¹⁸ or as referring not to the “house of David” but to the “house of [a god named] Dôd.” This reading is achieved by adding vowels to the stele’s *btdwd* so that it reads as *bêt-dôd* rather than *bêt dāwîd* and then understanding this *bêt-dôd* to refer to a place or temple name, analogous to, say, the place and temple name *bêt-’ēl*, or Bethel (the “house of God” or “house of [the god named] El”).¹⁹

The revisionist argument concerning forgery is dismissed by most as patently ridiculous and even seems, as several scholars have pointed out, intended as a gratuitous insult directed against the excavation director at Tel Dan, the esteemed Avraham Biran.²⁰ The latter argument, concerning the reading “house of [a god named] Dôd,” while at one point plausible, is now to be judged extremely unlikely, given that the second of the two Tel Dan fragments (Fragment B), found a year after the discovery of Fragment A, quite arguably contains, in line 7, the name Jehoram, son of Ahab, who reigned from ca. 849–843 BCE over the Northern Kingdom of Israel (that is, over the northern half of the originally united nation of Israel, which split into two separate kingdoms after the death of Solomon in ca. 931 BCE). This royal name is followed, moreover, in line 8, by the epithet “king of Israel” (meaning, again, king of the northern half of Israel’s divided monarchy), and then, still in line 8, by what seems to be the name of Ahaziah, son of Jehoram or Joram (these are two variations on the same name), who, according to the biblical account, was the king over Judah, the southern half of Israel’s divided kingdoms, during part of the time that Jehoram ruled in the North (Ahaziah ruled ca. 843 BCE). Such a concentration of royal referents in lines 7–8 virtually demands that the reference to *btdwd* that follows in line 9 be read as a referring to the royal “house of David” of which the southern King Ahaziah was a scion. Stated somewhat more simply: what Fragment B reveals about the overall royal content of the Tel Dan inscription effectively demonstrates that Fragment A’s reference to *btdwd* must be read as the “house of David.”²¹ The noted French epigrapher André Lemaire has in addition made a strong case recently for finding a reference to the “house of David” in the ninth-century BCE inscription of King Mesha of Moab.²² As above, of course, we must remember that this ninth-century BCE evidence can only definitively prove that, one hundred or so years after he supposedly lived, the royal dynasty established in Jerusalem traced its lineage back to a purported David. Still, the conclusion that most naturally follows from this datum, contrary to the revisionist position, is that there must in fact have been a David, who about a century prior to the mid-ninth century BCE established a royal house or dynasty with its seat in the southern or Judahite region of the land of Israel, most likely in Jerusalem.

Indeed, contrary again to the revisionist position, there must have been a tenth-century BCE Jerusalem. Granted, the evidence for this has proven difficult to muster, given that modern demographic and religious realities make the remains of ancient Jerusalem generally inaccessible to archaeologists. It is not clear, moreover, just how many remains from Iron Age Jerusalem could still be found even if archaeological excavation were possible. Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt several times during the course of its millennia-long history, and many of the city's rebuilders have thwarted those who would today uncover Jerusalem's past by incorporating materials from older periods into their newer construction.²³ In addition, architects responsible for monumental building projects in the Persian and Herodian periods (the late sixth through fourth centuries BCE and the late first century BCE and early first century CE) cleared away some older structures entirely in order to set the foundations of their new edifices on bedrock.²⁴

Still, there exists a reasonable enough collection of tenth-century BCE materials from Jerusalem—walls,²⁵ pottery, and also, perhaps, a distinctive stepped-stone structure²⁶—to indicate that while the tenth-century BCE city was surely modest in scope (more on this below), it was nonetheless there. There must have been as well, despite the revisionist claims, a tenth-century BCE Judah, which is to say, a reasonably-sized community in the southern or Judahite half of the central Israelite hill country, rather than just the “few dozen villagers” Lemche and Thompson posit. In fact, by 1997 Thompson, at least, seems to have backed off from this minimalistic figure in favor of a slightly larger population estimate of circa two thousand,²⁷ but he seems mistakenly to believe that this number, which he takes from the work of the archaeologist Israel Finkelstein, represents the entire population of the Judaeen hill country and not just, as Finkelstein would have it, the population of the Judaeen highlands immediately surrounding Jerusalem.²⁸ The larger region of Judah was far more substantially settled; Carol Meyers in fact speaks of a “population explosion in the Judean hills” in the period “from the late eleventh century well into the tenth century.” Meyers points out, moreover, that this “increase in population density was clearly not a localized Judean phenomenon,”²⁹ and archaeologists now estimate that the tenth-century BCE population of the greater Israelite hill country region would have been at least sixty-five thousand and possibly as large as one hundred thousand.³⁰ Within such a community there are surely “enough people,” contra the revisionist claim, “for [some] Saul or David to be king of.”

I would in addition maintain, contrary once more to the revisionists, that the standard scholarly consensus regarding the date of the biblical

texts that tell the stories of David is correct. The revisionists, recall, suggest that these texts were written only during the Persian period (that is, during the late sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BCE) or even during the Hellenistic era of the third and second centuries BCE.³¹ The standard consensus, however, dates the accounts concerning David as they have come down to us, and the larger complex in which the Davidic materials are embedded (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings), to the end of the seventh century BCE or the beginning of the sixth.³² A late seventh- or early sixth-century BCE date for this corpus (which biblical specialists usually call the Deuteronomistic History, because of its writings' close relationship to the book of Deuteronomy) has traditionally been argued for on textual grounds: because the Deuteronomistic History culminates by lauding the religious reforms of King Josiah, who reigned from ca. 640–609 BCE, scholars have argued that its various narratives came together—at least in a preliminary form—either during or immediately following Josiah's reign. Certainly, this complex could not have been compiled earlier. And to most biblical scholars it has seemed unlikely, contrary to the revisionists, that it could have come into existence much later, as it reflects barely any knowledge of the calamitous events of the sixth century BCE. The text thus describes only the initial years after the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE and seems to know nothing about the difficulties encountered afterward, including those encountered fifty years later, when the members of the Judahite community who had been exiled to Babylon returned to their homeland and struggled to rebuild both their body politic and some of their culture's core social institutions (in particular, the Jerusalem temple that the Babylonian army had destroyed).

Quite recently, moreover, Dever has sought to augment these textually-based arguments for the dating of the Deuteronomistic History with archaeological evidence, suggesting that the picture of Israelite life the Deuteronomistic texts present fits *only* in the period of ca. 1000–600 BCE and that the texts' date of original compilation (although not necessarily the date of their final editing) must therefore lie within this period as well.³³ Regarding, for example, the Deuteronomistic History's description of the Jerusalem temple said to be built by Solomon in 1 Kings 6–8, Dever writes:³⁴

Every detail of this lengthy description of the building's plan, construction, and furnishings—even several rare and difficult technical terms in Hebrew—can now be fully illustrated by parallels of Canaanite and Phoenician temples elsewhere. It is rarely noted, however, that temples combining *all* the details in 1 Kings 6–8 are found in the tenth/ninth century B.C.E.—and only there.

Dever then goes on to note that “by the ... Hellenistic period, the Jerusalem temple had been completely demolished and had long disappeared,” and, having made this observation, asks of the revisionists: is it reasonable to argue that the Bible’s detailed and archaeologically plausible description of a temple built by Solomon in the tenth century BCE was invented in a much later age when no such temples existed?³⁵ His answer, obviously, is no: that instead the Deuteronomistic accounts must describe a temple to which the Deuteronomistic Historians were actually witness. These accounts must therefore have had their origins during the years prior to 586 BCE, when Solomon’s temple still stood. As I have already indicated, this is an answer with which I would agree.

Yet despite my efforts to affirm here my convictions, contrary to the revisionists, that there really was a tenth-century BCE David, that there really was a tenth-century BCE Jerusalem, that there really was a tenth-century BCE community living in Judah, and that the biblical accounts of David really do date from the Iron Age period of Israelite history, I do not wish to assert much more than that regarding the historicity of the biblical record with regard to David’s life. Certainly, like almost all biblical scholars, I would deny the historical accuracy of some of the more fantastic aspects of the David stories, such as the 1 Samuel 17 tale of David’s defeat of the ferocious Philistine warrior Goliath (parts of which, in any case, seem to have been borrowed from the story of the hero Elhanan’s defeat of this strapping foe in 2 Sam 21:19).³⁶ Like an increasing number of my colleagues, moreover, I would deny the accuracy of the biblical accounts that accord to David a mighty empire that extended well beyond Israel’s traditional borders to encompass the lands of Edom, Moab, and Ammon in the east and Aramaean territories in the north reaching as far as Damascus. In addition, according to the biblical account, this mighty Davidic empire entered into favorable treaty arrangements with the Philistines on its west, with the Phoenician city of Sidon on the northern Levantine coast, and with the Syrian city of Hamath. No such reconstruction, however, is supported by what we know from the archaeological record or from other extrabiblical evidence.³⁷

Indeed, the archaeological evidence cannot even support the Bible’s notion that a powerful Davidic monarchy existed *within* the borders of Israel. There is virtually no Davidic-era evidence, for example, of the sort of monumental architecture that we would expect to find in a mighty kingdom and surely no evidence of the sort of standardized monumental architecture that we do see somewhat later in Israelite history and that indicates the presence of a strong and centralized authority able to impose its will (or at least its design preferences!) across the land. There is minimal archaeological evidence as well for

substantial urbanization during the time of David, and since urbanization tends to imply a degree of centralization as well as affluence, this again belies the Bible's notion of David's monarchy as a powerful and wealthy one.³⁸ There is in particular minimal evidence for substantial urbanization in Davidic Jerusalem (although, as I have noted, there are definitely some Davidic-era remains), which yet again belies the biblical account and its conviction that David built a great city and a large palace there (see especially 2 Sam 5:9–12).³⁹

All of which is to say: while I do wish to claim that there was a historical David, I do not want to argue that the Bible's stories about David should be taken at anything close to face value. David was not the sort of powerful potentate the Bible makes him out to be, one who controlled a vast empire, who amassed significant wealth from the tribute collected from his vassals and the booty claimed during his conquests, and who established a major political and religious center in Jerusalem, complete with a magnificent palace and a significant entourage (well-trained military troops, civil officials, priestly authorities, and a harem). Rather, he was a small-scale chieftain who, during the early days of the process that led to Israelite state formation, seems to have gathered around him followers from some of Israel's tribal communities, especially followers from his own tribal community of Judah and from the tribal communities of Benjamin and Ephraim located to Judah's north. David seems also to have exercised some measure of control over territories that lay congruent to these tribes' lands to the north, in the Galilee; to the east, in Transjordan; and to the south, in the Negev.⁴⁰ All of this, in addition to certain bureaucratic structures and sacral-religious ideologies that David may have put in place, could well have laid the ground for the emergence of full-fledged Israelite statehood.⁴¹ Still, it is only later, in the middle decades of the tenth century BCE, that a true state under Solomon emerges (although again not, in my estimation, the extensive and glorious empire of the biblical account).⁴² To this extent we do need to accept the revisionists' understanding of the David stories as literature.



But how are we to analyze this literary corpus? Among biblical scholars today the predominant methodological approach (or what is perhaps better described as a collection of related methodological approaches) is what is called narrative criticism, or sometimes the new literary criticism (to distinguish it from the older literary or source criticism that is most famously associated with the nineteenth-century German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen). Proponents of this

narrative or new literary criticism, heavily influenced by strategies of literary criticism developed by students of modern literature (especially students of modern European and American short stories and novels), deliberately focus “upon *text* rather than *context*,” upon “the response of the reader in determining the meaning and significance of the text” rather than on “the intention of the author and the original context of the writing.”⁴³ These new literary critics, that is, understand biblical narratives as having “a literary integrity apart from circumstances relating to the compositional process [and] the historical reality behind the story.”⁴⁴ Their concern is therefore to interpret “the existing text (in its ‘final form’) in terms primarily of its own story world, seen as replete with meaning, rather than understanding the text by attempting to reconstruct its sources and editorial history, its original setting and audience, and its author’s or editor’s intention in writing.”⁴⁵

I, however, like biblical studies’ older literary or source critics, continue to find that the compositional process, the original context, and the author’s or editor’s intent (in as much as we can determine these things) are crucial to my understanding of a biblical text. With regard to my discussions of the David stories below this means, first, that I will take seriously the various sources for the David story that I believe are found within the Samuel materials and I will also take seriously the way representations of David and his relationship with Jonathan differ among these various sources (in much the same way, I would suggest, that I took seriously our various sources for the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh tradition—the Gilgamesh Epic’s Standard version, the Old Babylonian version, and the Epic’s Sumerian antecedents—and took seriously as well the ways in which portrayals of Gilgamesh and Enkidu varied among these corpora). Moreover, while I do not, as I have noted above, see the various Samuel stories about David as historically reliable, I do intend to take seriously the mindset and worldview of the Iron Age Israelite authors and editors who recounted these Samuel narratives and in addition the mindset and worldview of the Iron Age Israelite audience for whom these stories were intended (in much the same way, I would suggest, that I took seriously the mindset and worldview of the second- and first-millennium BCE Mesopotamian communities that generated our various Gilgamesh accounts). I am convinced, in fact, that the various storytellers of ancient Israel presented their narratives about David in a certain way and that the various redactors of the biblical text preserved certain versions of these storytellers’ tales because these accounts somehow made sense, or “worked,” within the context of the storytellers’ and redactors’ day. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager have recently claimed, “It matters little whether the biblical accounts are true in the positivistic sense of some historians and biblical

scholars. It is enough to know that the ancient Israelites believed them to be so. The stories must have passed some test of verisimilitude, that is, having the appearance of being true or real.”⁴⁶ This is a statement with which I fully agree.

What this means more specifically regarding the part of the David stories that interests me most, the narratives concerning David’s interactions with Jonathan, is that while I will not necessarily maintain the historical David had the sort of interactions with a comrade Jonathan these narratives describe—indeed, I will not necessarily maintain that David knew a Jonathan, nor even that the biblical Jonathan existed—I do believe that any explanation I offer of the stories of David and Jonathan has to make sense within the conceptual world of ancient Israel; my explanation has to “fit,” that is, within the parameters of what we can know about ancient Israelite society. This is the same point I have insisted on already in [chapter 1](#) with regard to the arguably homoeroticized language and images that occur within the David and Jonathan stories: these apparently homoeroticized language and images need to be analyzed according to the paradigms of sexual relations operative in the biblical world and not according to the terms in which we have categorized sexual interactions and identity in ours. Furthermore, as I have also already indicated in the prologue, I aim to produce an analysis that, after situating the David stories’ seeming homoeroticized language and images within their ancient Israelite context, explains how these motifs function within the Samuel narrative as a whole. Which is another way of saying that what I ultimately wish to ask of the David stories is the same overarching question I ask in my study of the Epic of Gilgamesh: how do the various elements of the David stories—in particular these stories’ apparent use of homoeroticized language and imagery in their depictions of David’s relationship with Jonathan—work within the Samuel tradition’s larger compositional framework and serve its overall narrative agenda?

My goal, therefore, in the next two chapters, is to consider the potentially eroticized and even sexualized language and imagery found in the David and Jonathan stories, using as much as possible an analysis that both takes seriously the narrative history, the narrative structure, and the narrative agenda of the Samuel tradition and that reflects as well the ancient Israelite mindset and worldview regarding sexual interactions, especially male-male erotic and sexual relations. I will begin, in the first section of [chapter 7](#), by assembling the same sort of maximalist catalog of the homoeroticized language and imagery found in the David-Jonathan narratives that I gathered in the first section of [chapter 3](#) regarding the Epic of Gilgamesh. Then, in the second section of [chapter 7](#), I will describe the reservations some

scholars have expressed about pursuing a homoeroticized interpretation of the David-Jonathan stories, just as I described in the second section of [chapter 3](#) the reservations some scholars have advanced regarding a homoeroticized reading of the Epic of Gilgamesh. In particular, with regard to the David and Jonathan story, I will consider other Hebrew Bible passages that speak of erotic and sexual interactions between male partners and the disjunctions between the presentation of male-male sexual interactions in those passages, on the one hand, and the David-Jonathan traditions, on the other. As I will suggest, I find none of the explanations commentators have advanced to elucidate these disjunctions satisfactory, so, in [chapter 8](#), I will turn to offer my own understanding of how the narrative structure and thematic imperatives of the Samuel materials might illuminate the ways in which arguably eroticized language and characterizations are used within the stories of David and Jonathan in service of the text's overarching agenda.

DAVID AND JONATHAN



When Heroes Love

As I indicated in the prologue, it is not uncommon for those who comment on the story of David and Jonathan to suggest parallels between the Bible's portrayal of these two heroes' relationship and the portrayal of the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu found in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh. In particular, interpreters who locate eroticized and sexualized language and imagery in the David and Jonathan story make this comparison. David Damrosch, for example, writes, "The relationship between David and Jonathan is ... developed in terms very similar to those used in the *Gilgamesh Epic* to describe the friendship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu," and then goes on to say that "in both texts, the relationship between the friends has clear overtones of a relationship of husband and wife." Neal Walls claims similarly that Gary David Comstock's analysis of the David-Jonathan narrative as "a love story" embedded within the more "conventional and socially acceptable language and form of covenant, friendship, politics, elegy, and soldiering" "applies equally well to the companionship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu." Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli remark as well on the affinities they see between the David and Jonathan story and the "explicitly homosexual motifs in the description of the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu."¹

To be sure, Schroer and Staubli overstate in speaking of the Gilgamesh Epic as containing "explicitly homosexual motifs," for, as I have suggested in previous chapters, the Gilgamesh Epic's homoerotic language is far more implicit than explicit, full of an ambiguity that I have argued is a critical aspect of the text's narrative structure and thematic agenda. Moreover, as I have also previously suggested, the Epic of Gilgamesh dates from a time "before sexuality" and thus from a time before the phenomenon of homosexuality of which Schroer and Staubli speak was manifest.² Still, Schroer and Staubli, as well as Damrosch, Walls, and interpreters like them, are right to point out that in the biblical story of David and Jonathan, as in

the Epic of Gilgamesh, there are many passages that seem to depict the two heroes' relationship as eroticized or sexualized in nature. Arguably, indeed, eroticized or sexualized language and imagery are present in all four scenes in the book of 1 Samuel in which David and Jonathan interact, and some scholars have in addition found indications of homoeroticism in 1 Sam 20:30–34, in which King Saul rages at his son Jonathan because of the favor Jonathan has shown to David. Eroticized language is potentially present too in 2 Sam 1:19–27, which records the lament that David is said to sing over Saul and Jonathan after Jonathan has been killed in battle against Israel's Philistine enemies and Saul has committed suicide rather than die himself by Philistine hands.³ In all, then, six passages in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel are worthy of our consideration:

1. the account of David's and Jonathan's first encounter found in 1 Sam 18:1–4;
2. the second (and, in fact, primary) account of David's and Jonathan's first interactions, found in 1 Sam 19:1–7;
3. the account of David's fleeing permanently from Saul's court, found in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (in most of the Bible's English versions, 20:1–42);
4. reports of Saul's anger over Jonathan's relationship with David, found in 1 Sam 20:30–34;
5. the account found in 1 Sam 23:15–18 of David's and Jonathan's last meeting;
6. David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, found in 2 Sam 1: 19–27.

Let me now turn to examine each of these passages.

The Account of David's and Jonathan's First Encounter Found in 1 Sam 18:1–4

As Gilgamesh and Enkidu are introduced to us separately in the Gilgamesh Epic's Tablet I, so are David and Jonathan introduced separately in the narratives of 1 Samuel. Jonathan enters the story first, in 1 Samuel 13, where he is described in vv 2–3 as leading a thousand men in the defeat of a garrison of Philistine soldiers that is encamped somewhere in the tribal territory of Benjamin, either in King Saul's hometown of Gibeah (1 Sam 10:26) or in the neighboring village of Geba.⁴ Curiously, however, nothing is said either in these verses or in those surrounding about who this valorous Jonathan is;⁵ only in the opening verses of a subsequent scene, which recount the Israelites' preparations for another battle against the Philistines at the nearby

pass of Michmash, are we told that Jonathan is the son of Israel's King Saul (1 Sam 13:16).⁶ We are also told in this passage that Jonathan, like his father but unlike the rest of the Israelite army, is armed with spear and sword (1 Sam 13:22). The stage is thereby set for us to expect great things from Jonathan in the engagement to come, as it is now established that, in addition to being an accomplished fighter, he is a royal scion and the bearer of the best available weaponry.

And in fact, in 1 Sam 14:1–23, Jonathan does deliver a great victory at Michmash, mounting a sneak attack on the Philistine camp assisted only by the young man who carries his arms. These two men manage to kill some twenty of their Philistine opponents, which throws the Philistine garrison into a panic. Saul and the Israelite army then sweep down in the midst of this confusion and send the Philistines fleeing. Subsequently, the people speak of this “great victory in Israel” that Jonathan has accomplished (1 Sam 14:45), and they further signal the esteem in which they hold Jonathan by ransoming him so that he is not condemned to death on account of his unwitting violation of an oath his father had made (Jonathan had eaten from a honeycomb that the army came across while on the march, even though Saul, unbeknownst to him, had vowed that the troops would fast that day in an effort to garner the favor of Israel's God, Yahweh; 1 Sam 14:24–46).

Yet even as this story of the victory at Michmash concludes by highlighting the prowess of Jonathan and his worth to the Israelites and thus seems to indicate that one of the narrative's primary interests at this point is to document Jonathan's heroic accomplishments, the text quickly abandons its focus on Jonathan's valorous exploits in order to return to a motif introduced previously in 1 Samuel 13:7b–15a.⁷ This motif concerns the ill-fated and even tragic nature of Saul's kingship, whereby all the king's actions, even though seemingly well intentioned, lead to misfortune.⁸ We have just seen, for example, how Saul's well-intentioned call for a fast in 1 Sam 14:24–46, meant to be pleasing to the deity, goes awry, as it is the mighty Jonathan who is almost lost to Israel as a result of his father's vow. Similarly, according to 1 Sam 13:7b–15a, Saul waits at Gilgal for the priest-prophet Samuel to come and offer sacrifice before the Israelites go forth to engage in a battle against the Philistines. But even though Saul waits for seven days, as Samuel, presumably speaking for God, had earlier commanded him to do (1 Sam 10:8), Samuel does not arrive. Consequently Saul, whose troops are beginning to desert him, offers the requisite sacrifices himself. Of course, as the luck of this ill-fated monarch would have it, Samuel shows up immediately thereafter and berates Saul for his failure to follow God's command, thus angering the deity, even though the king's intent in offering sacrifices to Yahweh before the battle had been just the opposite: to please Yahweh and

enlist divine support. Then, according to 1 Sam 15:1–33, Saul fails to destroy all the spoil he had captured in battle against the Amalekites, although this is what Yahweh ordered. Yet, again, Saul's actions seem to be well-intentioned, as he claims he spared the best of the Amalekites' livestock so that it could later be sacrificed to God (1 Sam 15:15, 21). But Saul's well-intentioned acts again miscarry, as Samuel once more berates the king for his failure to follow Yahweh's decree. Whereas previously, moreover, Samuel told Saul that Yahweh was going to take away from him any hope of a dynasty as punishment for his disobedience (1 Sam 13:13–14), Samuel now declares Saul's own reign forfeit and announces Yahweh's intention to choose another as king (1 Sam 15:23, 26–29).

Having thereby established Saul's kingship as failed, the 1 Samuel narrative is prepared to introduce the character who will ultimately replace Saul, David. David enters the story as we have it in 1 Sam 16:1–13, presented there as a mere shepherd boy, the youngest of the many sons of the Bethlehemite Jesse.⁹ Despite, however, these rather improbable qualifications, this youngster is designated as Israel's king to be by Samuel, who acts on Yahweh's behalf. Yet immediately thereafter, in 1 Sam 16:14–23, a different tale introducing David is found. In it, David, although still described as a shepherd (1 Sam 16:19), seems an older and more seasoned character than does the young boy of 1 Sam 16:1–13, as he is said to have established a reputation among the Israelites as a valiant warrior and a skilled musician (1 Sam 16:18).¹⁰ According to this 1 Sam 16:14–23 version of the "introducing David" tale, it is his skill as a musician that brings David to Saul's court, where he is asked to play the lyre to calm the king, who, as a consequence of forfeiting his claim to kingship, is now being tormented by an evil spirit Yahweh has sent (1 Sam 16:14). Also according to this 1 Sam 16:14–23 account, Saul makes David his armor-bearer because he is so pleased with David as a courtier (1 Sam 16:21). Indeed, after receiving permission from David's father Jesse, Saul appoints David as a permanent member of his entourage (1 Sam 16:22).

Yet as we read on, the text as we have received it soon switches back to the motif introduced in 1 Sam 16:1–13 of David as a mere shepherd boy who, although he has been designated by Samuel as Saul's successor, has not yet become a part of Saul's retinue. Thus 1 Sam 17:12–31 describes how the shepherd boy David initially comes to Saul's court just to run an errand, to deliver food to his older brothers, who are members of Saul's army.¹¹ He remains because he becomes determined to fight against the Philistine champion Goliath, who daily has been taunting the Israelites and challenging them to send out a soldier to engage him in single-handed combat. According

to this tradition, it is only after the improbable victory of the unarmed and untrained David over the Philistine warrior (1 Sam 17:50) that he is brought before Saul for the first time (1 Sam 17:55–58), and only at this point does he join Saul's household (1 Sam 18:2).

More important for our purposes, however, is that it is only at this point, according to this particular account of David's coming to court, that our two focal characters, David and Jonathan, are said to meet, when, as soon as David has finished speaking with Saul after the victory over Goliath, Jonathan is said to find himself "bound" (*niqšar*) to David. Most literally, the text reads, "the soul (*nepeš*) of Jonathan was bound (*niqšar*) to the soul of David"; somewhat more idiomatically, "Jonathan's life was bound up with David's life" (1 Sam 18:1). In the next line of this verse, moreover, Jonathan is said to "love" (*'āhēb*) David as himself (or "as his own soul"; *kēnapšô*), and this sentiment is repeated in v 3, where Jonathan is said to enter into a covenant (*bērît*) with David on account of his "loving him as himself" (or, again, or "as his own soul"; *be'ahābātô 'ôtô kēnapšô*). These verses read:

When he [David] had finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's life was bound up with David's life, and Jonathan loved him as himself. And on that day, Saul took him [David], and he did not let him return to his father's house. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself.

Then, in v 4, Jonathan gives David some of his most precious possessions: "And Jonathan stripped off the robe he had on, and he gave it to David, along with his battle raiment and even his sword and his bow and his belt."

At first glance this passage, with its declarations of love in vv 1 and 3 and its portrayal of Jonathan's overwhelming and apparently selfless munificence in v 4, seems clearly to speak to the intense feelings of personal affection and homoeroticized endearment that are assumed by, say, Schroer and Staubli, whom I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. But, during the last forty years, biblical scholars have raised important questions about the precise meaning of the verb "to love" (*'āhēb*) and the related noun "love" (*'ahābā*) in this and similar texts, asking especially about the relationship between Jonathan's two declarations of "love" in 18:1, 3 and the "covenant" (*bērît*) that he is said to make with David in v 3. The impetus for such questions comes from an important article published by William L. Moran in 1963 on the concept of the love of God in the book of Deuteronomy. In this essay Moran demonstrates that Deuteronomy's understanding of love—by which he meant both "Yahweh's love for Israel, and the imperative necessity of Israel's love for Yahweh in return"—is not at all our

contemporary sense, which defines love in terms of a tender psychological feeling; a strong personal attachment; a sympathetic understanding; a deep, natural, and genuine affection.¹² Rather, according to Moran, love in Deuteronomy is a concept grounded in political language, and this political definition of love frequently occurs as well, as Moran sees it, in the related books of the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings).

More specifically, Moran argues that the love of God in Deuteronomy—1. which is something that can be commanded, 2. which stands intimately related to the concepts of fear and reverence, and 3. which is expressed in terms of loyalty, service, and unqualified obedience to the demands of the law—is a love that has its basis in the ancient Near Eastern ideology of covenant in general and in the covenant demands of fealty and devotion that ancient Near Eastern suzerains imposed upon their vassals in particular. Indeed, Moran substantiated his argument by listing a number of specific parallels between the language of love found in ancient Near Eastern texts that describe suzerain-vassal treaties and texts from Deuteronomy that describe Yahweh's covenant with Israel. He quotes, for example, the oath the seventh-century BCE Assyrian king Ashurbanipal required of his vassals—"the king of Assyria, our lord, we will love"—to which we might compare what is surely the most famous "love" passage in Deuteronomy, Moses' decree to the Israelites that "you shall love (*'āhēb*) Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:5).¹³ Moran also cites numerous lines from the fourteenth-century BCE letters sent by various kings of Canaan to the Egyptian court at Amarna, the capital of Canaan's overlord, Pharaoh Akhenaton. These letters repeatedly declare the vassals' "love" for the pharaoh; as Moran writes, "this is only another way of stating his [the vassal's] basic relationship to the latter, that of servant."¹⁴ Again, we might compare from Deuteronomy passages such as Deut 10:12, "So now, O Israel, what does Yahweh your God ask of you but to fear Yahweh your God, to walk in all his ways, to love (*'āhēb*) him, and to *serve* Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (emphasis mine).

Moran further buttressed these conclusions by identifying at least three narrative passages from the biblical stories about David that, although concerned with relationships between David and other human beings rather than David's relationship with Yahweh, nevertheless seemed to him to depend *not* on an understanding of love as a natural expression of affection but rather on Deuteronomy's understanding of love as a mandatory obligation of covenant.¹⁵ The first is 1 Kgs 5:15 (English 5:1), a passage that is set during the reign of Solomon, David's son and heir, but that looks back briefly to David's

earlier tenure as king. As part of this retrospective, Hiram, who was king of the Phoenician city-state of Tyre, is described as having been the “lover” (*’ōhēb*) of David. This Moran took to mean that David and Hiram were in a treaty relationship with one another, as alluded to in 2 Sam 5:11, which describes Hiram’s sending of messengers to David, along with skilled craftsmen who were to help in the building of David’s palace and material goods that were to be used in the construction.¹⁶ Second, Moran cited 2 Sam 19:7 (English 19:6), in which Joab, who served as David’s military commander after David became king, rebukes David for grieving over the death of his son Absalom, who had rebelled against him, while “hating those who love you (*’ōhābēkā*).” This, according to Moran, refers to those “servants” (19:6; English 19:5) who had continued to extend covenant fidelity to David and his monarchy despite Absalom’s attempts to claim the throne. Third, Moran drew attention to 1 Sam 18:16, where all Israel and Judah—that is, the members of the ten Israelite tribes of the North and the two Judahite tribes of the South—are said to “love” (*’ōhēb*) the young David shortly after he became a member of King Saul’s court. This is to say, as Moran understood it, that all the people of Israel and Judah offered David their fealty and support and thus extended to him proleptically the covenant loyalty they would later be required to grant him when he became king. Moran also suggested briefly, and in a footnote, that the love between David and Jonathan that is described in 1 Sam 18:1 and 3 (and in 20:17 as well, to be discussed further below) was a love not of personal affection but of “loyalty, service and obedience,” an obligation of fidelity stemming from the covenant the two are said to have made. He in particular pointed out how these texts’ descriptions of Jonathan’s loving David “as himself” (*kēnapšō*) parallel seventh-century BCE Assyrian treaty traditions in which the future vassals of King Ashurbanipal are commanded to love their overlord to be “as yourselves” (*kī napšātkunu*).¹⁷

Among subsequent commentators many have followed Moran in arguing that the language of love found in 1 Sam 18:1 and 3 (and 20:17) should be seen as having political connotations. For example, in a study that examines in detail the way the verb “love” is used throughout the David-Jonathan narratives, J. A. Thompson speaks of the “political overtones” of the term in 1 Sam 18:1–4 and related passages,¹⁸ and in a brief note inspired by Thompson’s essay, Peter R. Ackroyd likewise suggests a “political sense” for love in 1 Samuel’s stories of David and Jonathan.¹⁹ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, in an article entitled “Loyalty and Love,” similarly proposes regarding 1 Sam 18:1–4 and 20:17 that “political overtones of loyalty and formal recognition are suggested for the use of *’āhēb* here by the association with the term ‘covenant’ in 18:3,”²⁰ and we can note too the comments

of Diana Vikander Edelman, who describes “the use of the verb ‘to love’ as a *terminus technicus* of treaty language” in the David-Jonathan accounts.²¹ P. Kyle McCarter, in his magisterial commentary on the book of 1 Samuel, further writes of how the language of love in 1 Sam 18:3 “hints of political loyalty.”²²

Yet, with the exception of Edelman, none of these commentators has been as convinced as was Moran that the love of David and Jonathan is to be understood as *exclusively* covenantal in nature.²³ Thus Thompson indicates that the language of love in 1 Sam 18:1 and 3, in addition to its political significance, also connotes “natural affection” that may well have been “deep and genuine.”²⁴ Ackroyd, too, insists on both a “non-political and political meaning” for love in 1 Sam 18:1–4,²⁵ and Sakenfeld argues similarly that the verb *’āhēb*, “to love,” carries a “double notion of personal relationship and political commitment” in 1 Sam 18:1–4. Jonathan and David, she writes, “have a relationship of deep personal affection.”²⁶ This same position is advocated by McCarter, who sees alongside the “hints of political loyalty” in 1 Sam 18:1–4 descriptions of “personal affection.”²⁷

Some interpreters, moreover, speak of Jonathan’s affection for David in 1 Sam 18:1–4 in homoerotic terms. Schroer and Staubli, for example, compare the conjunction of the terms *nepeš*, most literally “soul,” and *’āhēb’ahābā*, “love,” in 1 Sam 18:1 and 3 to the five times that the love-struck woman of the Song of Songs speaks of her beloved as the one *še’āhābā napšî*, literally the one “whom my soul loves” (Cant 1:7, 3:1, 2, 3, and 4), to argue that David’s and Jonathan’s relationship should be understood, like the relationship depicted in the Song of Songs, as “a relationship of erotic love.”²⁸ Samuel Terrien similarly proposes that Hebrew *nepeš* in 1 Sam 18:1–4 has homoerotic connotations, pointing out that the sense of *nepeš* as “soul” in Hebrew is very different from the Greek sense with which we still live in large part today.²⁹ In Greek tradition, as frequently in ours, the ethereal and immortal *psychē* or “soul” is viewed as standing in antithetical relation to “an impure flesh.” “On the contrary,” Terrien writes, “Hebrew *nephesh* [*nepeš*] designates the fullness of the self, the *erōs*, the drive to extend the self to the utmost, the organic intermingling of what we mistakenly call body and soul, the ‘psychosomatic’ oneness.” Consequently, Terrien understands the use of *nepeš*, “soul,” in 1 Sam 18:1–4 to indicate that the “‘psychosomatic’ oneness” or “whole being” of Jonathan was bound to the “‘psychosomatic’ oneness” or “whole being” of David in an “all-embracing” love characterized by emotional intimacy and physical eroticism.³⁰

In support of this homoeroticized interpretation, we might consider a passage found earlier in this version of the story of David’s arrival at Saul’s court, 1 Sam 17:23–27, which describes Goliath’s taunting of

the Israelite army. In this text, a line is included in which it is said that Saul had promised to give his daughter to whomever might kill the Philistine champion (1 Sam 17:25). Consequently, in 1 Sam 18:17, as this particular version of the “David comes to court” story continues, Saul offers his daughter Merab to the victorious David.³¹ David refuses, ostensibly because he is of such a lowly status (he is no more than a shepherd boy and a youngest son, recall, in this particular account’s conceit). Thus he claims he is not worthy to be the king’s son-in-law (1 Sam 18:18). But, in the same way that some commentators have suggested that Gilgamesh refused Ishtar’s proposal of marriage in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet VI, because he had come to prefer the loving relationship he had established with Enkidu,³² might we ask whether David refuses to wed Merab in this version of the story of his joining Saul’s court because he has come to prefer the loving relationship that, according to 1 Sam 18:1–4, he has entered into with Saul’s son Jonathan.³³ As Damrosch puts it, although David opts not to take the king’s daughter, “he does get the king’s son,” taking on “the role of the young husband, metaphorically in relation to Jonathan.”³⁴ Here, again, it is tempting to compare materials from the Epic of Gilgamesh, this time language from the opening scenes, where, at least in the axe dream in which Gilgamesh first symbolically encounters Enkidu,³⁵ Gilgamesh visualizes himself as loving and caressing his heroic counterpart to be as if Gilgamesh were a newlywed husband and Enkidu, like Jonathan in 1 Sam 18:1–4, were “like a wife.”

The Second (and Primary) Account of David's and Jonathan's First Interactions (1 Sam 19:1–7)

The narrative I have just been considering, which describes David as an unknown shepherd boy who is not introduced to Saul and does not come to the attention of Jonathan until after David’s improbable victory over Goliath, is scattered sporadically through 1 Samuel 17 and 18, found in 1 Sam 17:12–31, 41, 48b, 50, 55–58, 18:1–6a, 10–11, 17–19, 29b–30. It concludes by the final verses of 1 Samuel 18, shortly after David declines to marry Merab.³⁶ Subsequent to 1 Sam 18:29b–30, only the more primary tradition, the one that identifies David as a warrior and courtier of Saul’s from the moment he is first introduced in 1 Sam 16:14–23, is represented. We can summarize the contents of these two narrative strands as follows:³⁷

	<i>The Primary Account</i> (David comes to Saul's court as warrior and courtier):	<i>The Variant Account</i> (David comes to Saul's court as unknown shepherd boy):
1 Sam 16:14–23	David, a warrior and skilled lyre player, becomes a courtier in Saul's court	
1 Sam 17:1–11	The Philistine champion Goliath challenges the Israelites	
1 Sam 17:12–31		The shepherd boy David, while bringing food to his warrior brothers, hears Goliath's taunts and resolves to confront him
1 Sam 17:32–40	Saul's courtier David prepares to confront Goliath	
1 Sam 17:41, 48b, 50		The unknown shepherd boy David fights with and triumphs over Goliath using only a slingshot
1 Sam 17:42–48a, 49, 51	The courtier David fights with and triumphs over Goliath using only a slingshot	
1 Sam 17:52–54	The Israelites defeat the demoralized Philistines	
1 Sam 17:55–58		The victorious David is presented to Saul
1 Sam 18:1–4		Jonathan encounters David, "loves" him, and the two make a covenant
1 Sam 18:5–6a		David is made commander over Saul's army
1 Sam 18:6b–9	Saul becomes jealous of David because of David's successes	
1 Sam 18:10–11		Saul, tormented by an evil spirit, tries to kill David
1 Sam 18:12–16	Saul fears David because of David's successes	
1 Sam 18:17–19		David refuses to marry Saul's daughter Merab
1 Sam 18:20–29a	David marries Saul's daughter Michal	
1 Sam 18:29b–30		Saul fears David because of David's successes

As [table 7.1](#) suggests, the primary tradition that introduces David as a warrior and courtier instead of as a young shepherd (1 Sam 16:14–23), although it differs from the variant narrative in its initial presentation of David's attributes and in its account of how David

became a part of Saul's entourage, agrees with its counterpart in many other respects. It agrees, for example, that David prevailed over the Philistine champion Goliath in single-handed combat and also agrees that, whether David was only a shepherd boy or already a seasoned soldier when he engaged in this fight, he used no weapon other than a slingshot to defeat his opponent (cf. 1 Sam 17:49, the primary tradition, and 1 Sam 17:50, the variant account). More important for our purposes, though, is the fact that the primary tradition may agree with the variant in representing the relationship of David and Jonathan in homoeroticized terms. This is indicated already in the first scene in which Jonathan and David interact according to the primary narrative, 1 Sam 19:1–7.

First Samuel 19:1–7 tells the story of how Jonathan works to dissuade Saul, who has grown jealous of David's extraordinary military prowess, from the king's determination to kill David.³⁸ In vv 4–6 of the text, in a conversation with Saul, Jonathan points out to his father that, however great the king's jealousy, David has in fact done nothing to transgress against Saul. Rather, Jonathan reminds Saul of all David has done on Saul's behalf, especially David's defeat of the fearsome Goliath. Jonathan's arguments in these verses are decidedly pragmatic in tone and political in nature: Saul's kingship is not threatened but strengthened by David's presence in the royal court, and hence David's life should be spared. But in vv 1–2 of this passage, where Jonathan first learns of Saul's murderous intentions and tells David of his resolve to try to stop his father, Jonathan's motivation for interceding is described *not* in terms of political pragmatism but in terms of an emotional commitment to David: "Jonathan, Saul's son, took great delight in David" (*wiyhônātān ben-šā'ûl ḥāpēs bēdāwīd mē'ōd*; 1 Sam 19:1).

Jonathan's emotional commitment to David, moreover, might be understood as eroticized in nature. The verb found in 1 Sam 19:1, *ḥāpēs*, "to delight in," is significant in this regard, for while this term is sometimes used to describe the delight a subject feels for impersonal or intangible objects (material possessions such as gold, vineyards, and houses; abstractions such as long life, help, and deliverance; actions such as doing what is good and pleasing before God), it often figures in important ways in passages concerned with sexual desire and erotic love.³⁹ In Esth 2:14, for example, King Ahasuerus of Persia is said to send for a particular woman from his harem a second time only if she "delighted" (*ḥāpēs*) him on the first occasion, which is to say only if he has found sexual pleasure with her. Similarly, in Gen 34:19, the Canaanite Shechem, son of Hamor, is said to "delight" (*ḥāpēs*) in Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah, whom he wishes to marry, motivated by his feelings of sexual desire—according to Gen 34:3 and

8, he is “drawn to” (*dābaq*) and “longs” (*hāšaq*) for Dinah. According to Gen 34:3, Shechem is motivated by his feelings of love (*’āhēb*) and tenderness as well.⁴⁰ Love (*’ahābā*) and *hāpēs*, “delight,” are also used in conjunction in Cant 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4, although the precise meaning of this thrice-repeated passage is unclear. Still, given the generally erotic and sexual context of the Song of Songs, it seems certain that *hāpēs* in the Song’s verses must have erotic and sexualized connotations.⁴¹

Together, these and other data allow for and may even promote the possibility of an eroticized and sexualized interpretation of Jonathan’s feelings for David in 1 Sam 19:1. Thus G. Johannes Botterweck writes that “*hāpēs* stands here [in 1 Sam 19:1] on the fringes of eroticism,” and Schroer and Staubli argue for “the erotic character of Jonathan’s affection.”⁴² In addition, Schroer and Staubli argue that the term *field* (*śādeh*), used to describe the setting of the rest of the passage (1 Sam 19:3), has erotic connotations, given that “field” in the Bible can be a place where lovers meet. They cite, for example, Cant 7:12 (English 7:11), where the love-struck woman says to her paramour, “Come, my beloved, let us go into the field.” Unfortunately, Schroer and Staubli overreach here, given that the term *field* is used frequently in the Bible without any erotic overtones. Still, it does seem clear that in this 1 Sam 19:1–7 tradition, as in the variant account found in 1 Sam 18:1–4, the relationship of David and Jonathan is presented using language and imagery that are potentially eroticized and even sexualized in nature.

The 1 Sam 19:1–7 tradition also seems to suggest, as does the variant account found in 1 Sam 18:1–4, that David’s relationship with Jonathan is somehow analogous to a marital relationship. Important to consider in this regard is the larger context of the 1 Sam 19:1–7 passage. Within the primary narrative tradition 1 Sam 19:1–7 follows immediately upon an account that describes David’s marriage to Saul’s younger daughter, Michal (1 Sam 18:20–29a).⁴³ That account very pointedly describes the impetus that led to David’s and Michal’s marriage as being Michal’s love (*’āhēb*) for David. Of course, love, as we have seen, can be a term that signifies only political allegiance and not emotional attachment, but commentators almost unanimously agree that in the Michal story the connotation of the term is affectionate,⁴⁴ for only affection would explain, as David J. A. Clines suggests, why Michal undertakes an “utterly reckless action” on behalf of David in 1 Sam 19:11–17, lowering David out of their bedroom window so that he can escape from Saul, who, again consumed by his jealousy of David, is attempting to kill him.⁴⁵ Indeed, Michal’s affections seem to be significant enough in degree that the passage that describes her marriage to David *opens* by commenting on Michal’s love for her husband to be. Notably, for our purposes, the

primary tradition's account of Jonathan's first interactions with David similarly begins with its description of the great delight Jonathan felt for David:

“Michal, Saul’s daughter, loved (<i>’āhēb</i>) David” (1 Sam 18:20)	“Jonathan, Saul’s son, took great delight (<i>hāpēš</i>) in David” (1 Sam 19:1)
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Notable also is the fact that, even though the two terms used to speak of Jonathan's and Michal's feelings are different in these two passages (*’āhēb* in 1 Sam 18:20, *hāpēš* in 1 Sam 19:1), they are—as I have pointed out above—commonly enough used in conjunction to suggest they have basically the same meaning in the 1 Sam 18:20 and 1 Sam 19:1 texts. It is further of significance that in both these passages Michal and Jonathan are initially identified in terms of their relationship to Saul: she is called “Saul’s daughter” and Jonathan is described as the king’s son. The conclusion to be drawn from these parallels is that the primary narrative tradition is deliberately structured in order to suggest that, according to 1 Sam 19:1–7, Jonathan represents metaphorically to David the wife that Michal, according to 1 Sam 18:20–29a, represents legally. In particular, like David’s wife Michal, Jonathan according to 1 Sam 19:1–7 participates in a relationship with David that is characterized using arguably eroticized and even sexualized language and imagery.⁴⁶

It is further arguable that the primary narrative tradition reflected in 1 Sam 19:1–7 suggests, similarly to the variant account, that David somehow rejects or repudiates his marital relationship with Michal in favor of his relationship with Jonathan. In 1 Sam 18:18, in the variant account, recall, the young shepherd boy David refuses to claim the prize his victory over Goliath offered—marriage to Saul’s oldest daughter Merab—because, I asked above, he had come to prefer the relationship he had established with Saul’s oldest son Jonathan according to 1 Sam 18:1–4.⁴⁷ In the primary account the matter is presented somewhat differently, as there a marriage does in fact take place, as I just noted, between David and Saul’s younger daughter Michal (1 Sam 18:27). Yet almost immediately after this marriage is celebrated, according to the primary account, David’s interactions with Jonathan begin (in 1 Sam 19:1), and this relationship David enters into with Jonathan can then be said to replace David’s relationship with Michal. To be sure, Michal does not completely disappear from the primary narrative after Jonathan’s and David’s interactions commence; in a subsequent scene (1 Sam 19:11–17) she helps David escape from Saul’s attempt to have him murdered. But in this escape scene, as Michal lowers David through the window of their bedroom so that he can flee from Saul’s henchmen, she effectively removes her husband

from her life, at least temporarily. Indeed, although it turns out that David and Michal are ultimately reunited, some years after Saul has died (2 Sam 3:12–16), the narrative's presumption in 1 Samuel 19 seems to be that the relationship of David and Michal has ended altogether, as David will return no more to Saul's court and Michal is given by Saul to another husband (1 Sam 25:44). J. Cheryl Exum sums up the matter well when she writes, "In saving David from Saul, Michal loses him."⁴⁸

But despite the fact that David is at this point separated from court and from Michal, he is not separated from Jonathan, who in two different passages is described as meeting secretly with David after David flees from Saul (1 Sam 20:1–21:1; English 20:1–42 and 1 Sam 23:15–18). In both these texts, moreover, as I will discuss below, potentially eroticized and sexualized language and imagery are used to describe David's and Jonathan's rendezvous. In this way the Samuel tradition may suggest that the erotic relationship it previously presumed between David and Michal should now be imagined to have been supplanted by a relationship between David and Jonathan. Particularly telling in this regard is the episode recounted in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42) in which David's and Jonathan's secret rendezvous seems to take place within the immediate vicinity of Saul's court. Yet although David lies hidden on the outskirts of Saul's compound for three days, and although, during this time, he twice manages to see Jonathan, "he apparently makes no effort to see Michal."⁴⁹ Exum, who points out this discrepancy, further notes the way in which David engages in a remarkably tender and touching farewell encounter with Jonathan in 1 Sam 20:41–42 after it becomes clear that he is still in danger from Saul and must flee, to which she contrasts the scene in 1 Sam 19:11–17 in which David takes leave of Michal by "practically bolt[ing] out the window without any parting words."⁵⁰ Once more, we might think by way of comparison of the Epic of Gilgamesh. In the Gilgamesh Epic, recall, when Gilgamesh and Enkidu actually encounter one another, in the Tablet II wrestling-match scene, they both abandon, and abandon rather abruptly, the interactions with women that had theretofore consumed their erotic interests, subsequently to focus their attentions exclusively on one another. Not dissimilarly, in the primary narrative strand that runs through 1 Samuel 18–19, David, almost immediately after marrying Michal (in 1 Sam 18:27), is described as encountering Jonathan (in 1 Sam 19:1–2), and shortly thereafter (by the end of 1 Sam 19:11–17) this relationship with Jonathan can be said to replace David's marital relationship with Michal.⁵¹

It remains here finally to consider how, in the book of 1 Samuel as we have it, the David and Jonathan materials that are found in the

primary narrative in 1 Sam 19:1–7 are combined with the variant narrative traditions found in 1 Sam 18:1–4, for arguably in the combined and composite account these two narrative strands are juxtaposed in a way that emphasizes even more emphatically than does either tradition independently the degree to which David’s and Jonathan’s relationship can be described in terms of marriage. Particularly striking here is the means by which the redactor of the combined tradition follows the lead of the primary account in presenting the stories of Jonathan’s and Michal’s initial encounters with David as parallel. That is: as the stories of Jonathan’s initial encounter with David in 1 Sam 19:1–7 and Michal’s initial encounter with David in 1 Sam 18:20–29a are presented as parallel *within* the primary narrative tradition, so too in the composite text are the variant tradition’s account of David’s and Jonathan’s first interactions (1 Sam 18:1–4) and the primary tradition’s account of David’s marriage to Michal (1 Sam 18:20–29a) rendered in parallel fashion, the redactor carefully shaping these narratives so that Saul’s two children mirror each other in some precise ways.⁵²

For example, just as Michal in the primary account is introduced through reference to her attraction to David (1 Sam 18:20), and with no reasons for this attraction being offered, so too in the variant account (in 1 Sam 18:1) is Jonathan depicted as being drawn to David almost instantaneously, and without any explanation from the narrator about the reasons for this attraction (Damrosch describes it as “love at first sight”).⁵³ Moreover, as I noted above, the narrator of the primary episode specifically describes Michal’s attraction to David in terms of the verb *’āhēb*, “to love,” just as Jonathan is described in the variant account as “loving” David (*’āhēb*, *’ahābâ*). In fact, just as Jonathan is *twice* said to love David in the variant set of source materials in found in 18:1–4 (1 Sam 18:1, 3), so is Michal *twice* said to love David in the primary account of their interactions found in 1 Sam 18:20–29a (1 Sam 18:20, 28). We might in addition suggest that, as Jonathan made a covenant with David in 18:3, so too does Michal enter into a similar contractual agreement with David, as the two marry according to 1 Sam 18:27.⁵⁴ To summarize:

Table 7.2

The Variant Account (1 Sam 18:1–4)	The Primary Account (1 Sam 18:20–29a)
1 Sam 18:1: “Jonathan loved (<i>’āhēb</i>) him (David) as himself”	1 Sam 18:20: “Michal, Saul’s daughter, loved (<i>’āhēb</i>) David”
1 Sam 18:3: Jonathan is again said to “love” David (<i>bē’ahābātô ’ôtô kēnapšô</i>)	1 Sam 18:28: Michal is again said to “love” David (<i>’āhēbathû</i>)
1 Sam 18:3: Jonathan enters into a contractual relationship (a covenant) with	1 Sam 18:27: Michal enters into a contractual relationship (a marriage) with

All these parallels imply the intent, within the composite tradition, to represent Jonathan as he was already represented in each of the composite's two sources: as being the structural equivalent of a wife to David. Arguably, moreover, by bracketing the story of David's and Michal's marriage (1 Sam 18:20–29a) between the two stories that introduce David's and Jonathan's marriagelike relationship (1 Sam 18:1–4 and 19:1–7), the composite suggests, as do both its sources, that Jonathan is not only the structural equivalent of a wife to David, but a wife who supplants one of his sisters. To bracket Michal between the David-Jonathan accounts as does the composite, that is, is in effect to squeeze her out, to render her relationship with David parenthetical and thus to indicate that it is Jonathan who has become David's primary relationship partner.

The Account of David's Fleeing Permanently from Saul's Court Found in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42)

I argued in my discussion of 1 Sam 19:1–7 above that the use of the verb *hāpēs*, “to delight in,” in v 1 of that passage could suggest that in the primary narrative tradition, as in the variant, the text intends for us to understand that, however politically driven certain aspects of the David-Jonathan relationship may be, the relationship was one of great affection—indeed, homoeroticized affection—as well. This is even more compellingly indicated in the primary account in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42), the story of David's fleeing permanently from Saul's court to protect himself from the murderous impulses of the king. As the story goes, David and Jonathan meet secretly after David, with Michal's help, has escaped from Saul's attempt to kill him in his bedchamber (1 Sam 19:11–17). In order to determine whether Saul still harbors homicidal intentions, the two heroes develop an elaborate plot. David deliberately absents himself from Saul's company for the feast of the new moon, although protocol seems to demand that he be present (1 Sam 20:5). Jonathan offers a fabricated excuse on David's behalf, with the presumption that, if Saul reacts graciously to the excuse, it will mean the king has no animosity toward David. If Saul, though, reacts with anger, then Jonathan will assume his father actually does seek to have David killed. When this plot is carried out, and Saul does react angrily, Jonathan, at another secret appointment he had previously set up with David, informs David of the news and then sends David away in order to keep Saul from taking David's life.

The initial aspect of this story notable for our purposes is the

language of love (*’āhēb*, *’ahābā*) used to describe the relationship of David and Jonathan in 1 Sam 20:17, as David and Jonathan work out the details of their plot to determine if Saul’s intent toward David is really murderous. Unfortunately, the textual tradition here is somewhat confused, as the Hebrew as it has come down to us reads, “So again Jonathan caused David to swear out of his (that is, David’s) love for him” (*wayyôsep yêhônātān lēhašbā’ ’et-dāwīd bē’ahābātô ’ôtô*). Since Jonathan has not previously been described as making David swear to anything, the “again” of the received tradition stands as nonsensical; the ancient Greek translation of 1 Samuel undoubtedly preserves the better reading here, that “Jonathan again swore to David out of his (that is, Jonathan’s) love for him.” The original oath to which the Greek refers is the one sworn by Jonathan in 1 Sam 20:12–13,⁵⁵ in which Jonathan promises that he will disclose to David whatever he learns from Saul about the king’s intentions. This agreement is designated a covenant (*bērīt*) in 1 Sam 20:16, and, as I have already noted, it is reaffirmed in 1 Sam 20:17 as Jonathan swears again to David “out of his love for him” (*bē’ahābātô ’ôtô*). Then, as v 17 continues, Jonathan is said to love David as he loved himself (*kī-’ahābat napšô ’āhēbô*). This language is obviously highly reminiscent of the language found in 1 Sam 18:1–4, in which Jonathan makes a covenant (*berīt*) with David because he loved him as himself (*bē’ahābātô ’ôtô kēnapšô*), and what is represented here in 1 Sam 20:16–17 is surely the primary version’s account of this important episode, which heretofore had only been presented in the variant materials interpolated in 1 Samuel 17 and 18.

From this observation it readily follows that the same sort of interpretations commentators have advanced regarding 1 Sam 18:1–4 can apply with regard to 1 Sam 20:16–17. First, we can note that the conjunction of the terms *love* (*’āhēb/’ahābā*) and *covenant* (*bērīt*) in 1 Sam 20:16–17 clearly point to there being a political dimension to David’s and Jonathan’s relationship. However, according to most commentators, David’s and Jonathan’s political relationship in 1 Sam 20:16–17 is, as in 1 Sam 18:1–4, coupled with “deep affection.”⁵⁶ As in 1 Sam 18:1–4, moreover, the affectionate aspects of David’s and Jonathan’s relationship could be described as homoeroticized in nature: the conjunction of the terms *soul*, *nepeš*, and *love*, *’āhēb/’ahābā*, in 1 Sam 20:17 could suggest, for example, as they do to Schroer and Staubli in their interpretation of 1 Sam 18:1 and 3, a relationship of erotic love.

This sort of homoeroticized interpretation finds support in the concluding verses of the 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 text (English 20:1–42). Throughout most of 1 Samuel 20 David hides in a field, waiting to hear how Saul has reacted to his absence from the new moon feast. When Jonathan comes out into the field to report Saul’s response to David,

he first sends a coded signal to him, as the two have prearranged, that the news is bad. This coded signal involves Jonathan's shooting of an arrow and sending his servant boy to retrieve it: as David and Jonathan have agreed, Jonathan will tell the servant boy, in a voice that David can overhear, that the arrow is on the boy's near side, if it turns out Saul bears no enmity toward David, and that the arrow is on his far side, if David is in fact in danger from Saul. Notably, this is but one of several times that bow-and-arrow imagery is used in the David-Jonathan narratives. In 1 Sam 18:4 one of the precious gifts that Jonathan gives to David after he makes a covenant with him is his bow (*qešet*), and Jonathan's prowess with a bow (*qešet*) is lauded in David's lament over the dead Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:22). There is also an enigmatic reference to a "bow" in the verses that introduce David's lament, which read, literally, "And David sang this lament over Saul and Jonathan, his son, and he said to teach the sons of Judah a bow. It is recorded in the Book of Jashar" (2 Sam 1:17–18). The text here is obviously quite obscure, but according to some commentators, its vague reference to a bow is to be taken as the ancient title of David's lament: thus "The Song of the Bow." If so, then it becomes intriguing to couple this reference to a bow to the references to Jonathan's bow and arrows in 1 Sam 18:4, 20:20–22, 36–38, and 2 Sam 1:22 and to argue further that these references may be a part of the text's homoeroticized imagery. The bow is, after all, "a common, practically unequivocal symbol of masculinity in ancient Near Eastern texts," and "the phallic symbolism of the arrow is rather obvious."⁵⁷ Jonathan's offering of his bow in 1 Sam 18:4, his shooting of arrows in 1 Sam 20:36, and David's subsequent lauding of Jonathan's prowess as an archer in 2 Sam 1:22 might therefore all be read in terms of homoerotic innuendo: a sexual proposition, followed by coitus, and then a fulfilled lover's words of gratitude.

At any rate, as I noted above, the news Jonathan has to bring to David in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42) is bad, and so he tells his attendant, after he shoots his arrow, that it is "beyond him" (1 Sam 20:38). Consequently David knows, when he emerges from his hiding place to speak directly with Jonathan, that he must leave, and the language the text uses in this farewell scene is highly emotionally charged. Both men are said to weep at their leave-taking, perhaps copiously (the textual tradition is confused, but the Hebrew *higdîl*, "to magnify," may point to such a meaning).⁵⁸ The two heroes are said in addition to kiss one another, and while, as we have seen in our discussion of the Epic of Gilgamesh, kissing in the ancient Near East need not have the connotations of eroticized intimacy it has most frequently in our culture, the emotional context of this farewell scene does suggest the kisses David and Jonathan exchange are markers of

affection, rather than, say, acts of homage (as in, for example, 1 Sam 10:1) or signs of respect (as in, for example, 2 Sam 20:9).⁵⁹ Jonathan also speaks, it seems in an effort to reassure David, of the eternal bond of fidelity that exists between them, that is, of the covenant the two established in 1 Sam 20:16–17. The passage reads (1 Sam 20:41–42):

David [who had been in hiding] rose from beside the mound,⁶⁰ and he prostrated himself, with his face on the ground, and he bowed down three times. Then they kissed one another, and they wept over one another, even profusely(?). Then Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for the two of us have sworn in the name of Yahweh that Yahweh will be between me and you, and between my descendants and yours, forever.”

They then part; they part, that is, with the text suggesting for us the great affection and great devotion they have offered to one another.

Crucial to note here is this text’s indication that Jonathan’s feelings for David are reciprocated,⁶¹ as the materials we have considered heretofore have made no explicit mention of David’s emotional engagement in his interactions with Jonathan. By professing this now, this passage works to set forth the point I have now intimated several times: that Jonathan is not only, like his sisters Merab (in the variant account) and Michal (in the primary narrative), placed in the position of being like a wife to David, but Jonathan is the wife who supersedes his sisters in terms of the depth of his relationship with David, especially the wife who supersedes his sister Michal. In the account of Michal’s marriage to David in 1 Sam 18:20–29a David is never said to respond emotionally to Michal’s love for him. Nor does he particularly seem to manifest any affection for her afterward: as I have already noted, following Exum, he expresses no regrets about being parted from her in 1 Sam 19:11–17 and he makes no effort to see her once that separation has occurred. Furthermore, David, as Exum points out, does nothing to include Michal when, after he has become a fugitive from Saul’s court, he arranges safe refuge for his parents in Moab (1 Sam 22:3–4).⁶² Rather, the text seems quite clear that for David, all that motivates his relationship with Michal is his own political gain.⁶³ “The idea was pleasing to David,” we are told, “to become the son-in-law of the king” (1 Sam 18:26), presumably because, “under certain circumstances, to be a king’s son-in-law is to be his legitimate heir.”⁶⁴ First Samuel 20:41 could well have made a similar point regarding David’s relationship with Jonathan: that David engaged with Jonathan only because Jonathan’s allegiance could help David secure Saul’s throne. However, through its descriptions of the two heroes’ kissing

and weeping, the text suggests just the opposite: that David is as emotionally committed to Jonathan as Jonathan is to him.⁶⁵ This passage thereby implies that, in terms of mutual affection and devotion, the David-Jonathan relationship surpasses the relationship between David and Michal.

That the David-Jonathan relationship somehow surpasses or supersedes the relationship between David and Michal is further indicated by the way in which the narrative again works to place this 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42) story featuring Jonathan in parallel with a story from elsewhere in the Samuel complex that features Michal: the story of 1 Sam 19:11–17 I have already described that tells of Michal’s effecting David’s escape from Saul’s court. In both 1 Sam 19:11–17 and 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42) one of Saul’s children acts in defiance of the expressed intentions of their father in order to protect David, and each episode ends with David separating from this protector child and fleeing from the presence of Saul. Moreover, in both episodes the offspring’s defiant act includes lying to Saul or to his representatives. Michal tells Saul’s messengers that David lies sick in bed in order to keep them from realizing he has fled (1 Sam 19:14), and, once her deception is discovered, she defends herself by mendaciously claiming that David had threatened to kill her unless she helped him escape (1 Sam 19:17). Likewise, in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42), Jonathan, as I have already noted, lies to Saul in presenting the fabricated excuse for David’s absence from the new moon feast and lies further by claiming he (Jonathan) gave David permission to celebrate the festival elsewhere (1 Sam 20:28–29). Also, in both stories, Saul reacts with anger once he perceives that his children have acted against him, accusing Michal of deceiving him in 1 Sam 19:17 and lashing out at and even attacking Jonathan physically in 1 Sam 20:30–34. As above, we can summarize in a simple table:

Table 7.3

1 Sam 19:11–17	1 Sam 20:1-21:1 (English 20:1–42)
Michal acts to save David in defiance of Saul’s expressed intent to have him killed	Jonathan acts to save David in defiance of Saul’s decision to put him to death
Michal lies (twice) to Saul in order to protect David (1 Sam 19:14, 17)	Jonathan lies (twice) to Saul in order to protect David (1 Sam 20:28–29)
Saul accuses Michal of deceiving him by abetting David (1 Sam 19:17)	Saul speaks angrily to and attacks Jonathan for favoring David (1 Sam 20:30–34)
Aided by Michal, David escapes from Saul’s assassins (1 Sam 19:12)	Aided by Jonathan, David learns that Saul does intend to kill him and so flees (1 Sam 20:35–21:1; English 20:35–42)

The parallel nature of the stories found in 1 Sam 19:11–17 and

20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42) is made even more obvious once we realize the story that intervenes between the two in the text of Samuel as we have it, the account in 1 Sam 19:18–24 of Saul dancing among a prophetic band led by Samuel, was almost certainly not a part of the original narrative, as it offers an explanation for something the Samuel tradition has already explained, in 1 Sam 10:9–16 (the origin of the proverbial saying “Is Saul also among the prophets?”). In addition, this “Saul dancing along with Samuel” story contradicts the tradition’s conviction, expressed in 1 Sam 15:35, that, after the battle against the Amalekites, Saul would never again see Samuel alive.⁶⁶ In the original narrative, therefore, the account in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42) of Jonathan deceiving Saul to facilitate David’s flight from court followed immediately upon the account in 1 Sam 19:11–17 of Michal deceiving Saul to enable David’s escape from Saul’s household, making even more evident the text’s intent to juxtapose the two episodes. The effect of this juxtaposition, moreover, is to suggest, as I proposed above, that Jonathan, the hero of the second story, has come to supplant Michal, the hero of the first. In fact, given that Jonathan is shown as acting to deliver David both immediately prior and subsequent to the Michal escape scene (in 1 Sam 19:1–7 and 1 Sam 20:1–21:1; English 20:1–42), we can again suggest, as I did above regarding the David-Jonathan stories bracketing the Michal marriage scene, that the narrative is structured so as to marginalize Michal, placing her in a parenthetical position in the text purposely to signal the parenthetical status of her relationship with David when compared to the relationship that has come to take primacy, the relationship of David and Jonathan.⁶⁷

Saul’s Anger Over Jonathan’s Relationship with David (1 Sam 20:30–34)

In 1 Sam 20:28–29 Jonathan, as he and David have planned, reports to Saul David’s fabricated excuse for David’s absence from the new moon feast. Saul’s reaction, as I have already noted, is the sort of hostile response the two heroes had feared, although, perhaps unexpectedly, his anger is initially directed toward Jonathan and not David.⁶⁸ The language Saul uses in his diatribe against Jonathan is perhaps also unexpected, as the king appears more to berate Jonathan’s mother than Jonathan himself, describing Jonathan as “the son of a perversely rebellious woman” (or “the son of a rebellious young woman”)⁶⁹ and condemning, along with Jonathan’s “shame” or “disgrace” (*bōšet*), the way he has “shamed” or “disgraced” his mother’s nakedness (*’arwat immekā*). Given, however, that “nakedness,” *’erwā*, most often refers to genitalia, the intent of, at

least, Saul's latter insult seems to be to suggest that, through his disgraceful actions, Jonathan has brought shame to the mother who bore him; McCarter has argued that the former insult likewise, although it may seem directed against Jonathan's mother, is actually meant to deride Jonathan as one who, like a rebellious servant girl, forsakes the overlord (in this case, Saul) to whom he properly owes allegiance.⁷⁰ Thus, for McCarter, Saul's insults are to be understood as condemning not Jonathan's mother but Jonathan for disloyalty.⁷¹

Nevertheless, as Schroer and Staubli particularly argue, the language Saul uses in his diatribe is extremely sexually charged, so much so that we may be meant to interpret it also in sexual terms; that is, to understand this charged language is used in Saul's insults because Saul perceives his son's misdeeds to be sexual as well as political. According, then, to Schroer and Staubli, Jonathan has not only engaged in "the political scandal of a royal son betraying father and kingdom for the sake of a stranger, but also the effrontery of this homosexual love." Schroer and Staubli, in support, point out that similarly charged language is used frequently in Leviticus 20, in that text's diatribes against various forbidden sexual practices, including male-male anal intercourse (Lev 20:13).⁷² Martti Nissinen similarly comments that "the mention of disgracing one's mother's nakedness (*'erwā*) conveys a negative sexual nuance and gives the impression that Saul saw something indecent in Jonathan's and David's relationship"; Nissinen further suggests that Saul's condemning of Jonathan for "choosing" (*bāḥar*) David to his own disgrace and to the disgrace of his mother's nakedness "indicates a permanent choice and a firm relationship," analogous to, say, a marriage.⁷³ Indeed, Nissinen might have added that, at least once in the Bible, the same verb, *bāḥar*, is used to describe the choosing of sexual partners (Gen 6:2).⁷⁴

The Account Found in 1 Sam 23:15–18 of David's and Jonathan's Last Meeting

After David and Jonathan part in 1 Sam 21:1 (English 20:42), the two are said to meet only once more in their lifetimes, in 1 Sam 23:15–18, when Jonathan again acts to protect David, coming to David while David hides at Horesh, in the wilderness of Ziph, in order to assure him that Saul will not find him (thus implying, at a minimum, that Jonathan does not intend to reveal to his father where David is hiding). The text describes Jonathan's assurances as meant, literally, to "strengthen his [David's] hand in Yahweh" (*wayḥazzēq 'et-yādô byhwh*).⁷⁵ More idiomatically, as McCarter points out, this phrase means "to encourage David through Yahweh," given that the phrase "strengthen the hand" elsewhere means "to encourage," especially to encourage those who

are fearful, as we would expect the fugitive David to be.⁷⁶ Such language thereby once more suggests, as do 1 Sam 18:1–4, 19:1–7, and 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42), Jonathan’s concern and care for David and therefore his affection, even though this text is without the erotic indications we have located in the passages we have previously examined. It is worth noting, however, with regard to the possible eroticized content of this passage that according to v 18, Jonathan and David are said to make a covenant, reminiscent of the covenants Jonathan is earlier said to have made with David in 1 Sam 18:1–4 and 1 Sam 20:16. Because, moreover, Jonathan is said to be motivated by his “love” (*’āhēb/’ahābā*) for David on both those occasions, and because this love, as we have seen, is understood by most commentators as a matter of personal affection as well as political allegiance, we can suggest that personal affection may again be a motivating factor in 1 Sam 23:18.

Exum has in addition argued that 1 Sam 18:1–4 and 1 Sam 23:15–18 are tied together by Jonathan’s relinquishing to David any claims he has to Saul’s throne: in 1 Sam 18:4 by Jonathan’s giving over to David the royal symbols of robe, battle garb, sword, bow, and belt, and in 1 Sam 23:17 by Jonathan verbally acknowledging David’s future rule, with Jonathan subordinate to him (“As for you, you will be king over Israel, and I will be your second-in-command”).⁷⁷ This correspondence allows us again to propose that, because Jonathan is said to be motivated by his “love” (*’āhēb/’ahābā*) for David in the former passage, he is motivated by the same affection, along with a sense of fidelity, in 1 Sam 23:15–18 as well. We might finally note, following David Jobling, that in 1 Sam 23:15–18, as in 1 Sam 20:41, Jonathan’s feelings of affection and fidelity seem reciprocated, given that in 1 Sam 23:18, and only in 1 Sam 23:18, are Jonathan and David said to make their covenant “together” (*wayyikrētû šēnēhem berît*).⁷⁸ As in 1 Sam 20:41, moreover, it is tempting to propose that this text’s stress on togetherness is meant to indicate a contrast between Jonathan’s relationship with David and the relationship of David and Michal by suggesting that, while Michal’s love for David went unreturned, with David taking advantage of it only because of the chance it offered him to claim Saul’s throne, Jonathan’s affection for David was reciprocated. As does 1 Sam 20:41, that is, 1 Sam 23:18 may want to show that Jonathan has replaced his sister as David’s primary relationship partner, his interactions with David manifesting mutual devotion in ways that her marriage to this king to be never did.

6. *David’s Lament Over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:19–27)*

Although at several points above, I have noted passages from the

David-Jonathan narrative that might fruitfully be compared to passages from the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is parallels between David's lament over the dead Jonathan in 2 Sam 1:19–27 and Gilgamesh's mourning over the dead Enkidu in Gilgamesh, Tablet VIII, that are most commonly cited by scholars.⁷⁹ Damrosch writes, for example, that “just as the marriage theme in the *Gilgamesh Epic* reaches its most direct expression at the close of the relationship, in Gilgamesh's lament for Enkidu, here [in the story of the relationship of David and Jonathan] it is developed most explicitly in David's lament after Saul and Jonathan die in battle.”⁸⁰ Similarly, Schroer and Staubli comment that “Gilgamesh mourns for Enkidu in language that comes very close to David's lamenting the loss of Jonathan.”⁸¹ The key verses of David's lamentation read (2 Sam 1:23, 25–27):

O Saul and Jonathan, beloved and delightful in their life,
And in their death, they are not separated.⁸²
They were swifter than eagles, stronger than lions.

...

How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle,
Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.
I grieve over you, my brother Jonathan,
You were such a delight to me.
Your love to me was wonderful,⁸³
Greater than the love of women.
How the mighty have fallen,
And the weapons of war have perished.

Of initial note here is the fact that David, in v 26, calls Jonathan “my brother” (*’āhî*). As I discussed at some length in [chapter 3](#), this might be significant, given the well-known tendency in ancient Near Eastern literature to use the terms *brother* and *sister* euphemistically to refer to a beloved and/or to the object of one's sexual desire. However, as I also discussed in [chapter 3](#), it is only here, in 2 Sam 1:26, and in a handful of passages in the Epic of Gilgamesh that the term *brother* is potentially used to speak of two men as the objects of each other's erotic or sexual desire; much more typically the terms *brother* and *sister*, when used in an eroticized context, refer to opposite-sex partners. I further noted in [chapter 3](#) that the term *brother* can be used in ancient Near Eastern tradition to refer to men who are partners in covenant relationship, and, because of the prevalence of covenant language found elsewhere in the David-Jonathan accounts, an interpretation that sees *brother* in 2 Sam 1:26 as a term of covenant fidelity rather than erotic love has much to recommend it. Indeed, this is the reading urged by scholars such as Frank Moore Cross, Michael

Fishbane, and Saul M. Olyan, and particularly of note in Fishbane's discussion is his observation that the same Deuteronomistic corpus in which the David-Jonathan stories are embedded uses the terms *lover* (*ʾōhēb*) in 1 Kgs 5:15 (English 5:1) and *brother* (*ʾāh*) in 1 Kgs 9:13 to refer to King Hiram of Tyre as a covenant partner of Kings David and Solomon.⁸⁴ This certainly suggests that the ancient redactors of the Samuel-Kings tradition, as well as its ancient audience, would likewise have understood the term *brother*, when used in conjunction with the term *love* in v 26 of David's lament over Jonathan, to be a reference to these two heroes' covenant fidelity.

Still, the fact that so many of the examples of the language of eroticized brother- and sisterhood that I cited in [chapter 3](#) come from the biblical tradition—from the biblical books of Proverbs and the Song of Songs (Prov 7:4–5 and Cant 4:9, 10, 12, 5:1, 2, 8:1), from the deuterocanonical texts of Tobit and the Additions to Esther (Tob 5:21, 7:11, 15, 8:4, Add Esth D:9), and from the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QapGen, col. ii)—may suggest that an ancient Hebrew audience would have at least registered the possibility of erotic overtones in the epithet *brother* with which David lauds Jonathan in 2 Sam 1:26. Moreover, while the terms *brother* and *love* certainly suggest covenant connotations when used in conjunction in 1 Kgs 5:15 (English 5:1), 1 Kgs 9:13, and elsewhere, the specific reference to love (*ʾahābā*) that David uses to describe his relationship with Jonathan as 2 Sam 1:26 continues, comparing Jonathan's love favorably to the love of women (*nīplēʾatā ʾahābātēkā lī mēʾahābat nāʾāšīm*), is, as Olyan points out, “extremely peculiar in a covenant context.” As Olyan explains, the stress on love in a covenant context typically sees love as an expression of loyalty or fidelity, whereas the love of women to which Jonathan's love for David is compared is usually “understood by scholars to be a reference to sexual or sexual-emotional love.”⁸⁵ To be sure, not everyone agrees with Olyan here: for example, Sakenfeld, despite the 2 Sam 1:26 evocation of the “love of *women*” (emphasis mine), still prefers to give priority in this passage to the politicized meaning of love originally identified by Moran and so downplays any eroticized interpretation.⁸⁶ Yet, among commentators, she (to my knowledge) stands alone in this view,⁸⁷ so that even those who acknowledge the political connotations of the term *love* elsewhere in the David-Jonathan story argue that “warm personal intimacy” is demonstrated in 2 Sam 1:26.⁸⁸

Yet how to describe more specifically the nature of that intimacy? There is debate. Exum, who translates “Your love for me was wonderful, more than the love of women,” takes David's words to mean that Jonathan loved David more than women love men or, perhaps, that Jonathan loved David more than women loved David.

However, it is not clear from the lament's text, she argues, that David loved Jonathan.⁸⁹ Still, she admits it is possible to interpret the poem as indicating this, as does, say, Terrien, who speaks of 2 Sam 1:26 as expressing the "all-shattering quality" of David's pain, which stems from the "all-embracing character" and "depth" of David's feelings for Jonathan. Erhard S. Gerstenberger similarly writes of David's "fairly unequivocal" characterization of his loving relationship with Jonathan as one of "great joy and bliss,"⁹⁰ and Cross and David Noel Freedman, who translate, "To love thee was, for me / better than the love of women," also indicate that David loved Jonathan, at least more than David loved women.⁹¹ My own sense is that Terrien, Gerstenberger, Cross, and Freedman have the better of Exum on this point, who seems to me to give too little attention to David's description of Jonathan's love as something "wonderful," that is, as something David seems to have cherished and, by implication, a love to which he responded.

In sum: I would interpret David's words in 2 Sam 1:26 to mean that David perceived Jonathan to have loved him in a way analogous to the sexual-emotional way in which a woman (Michal, say) would love a man and to imply that David returned that love, finding it to be something "wonderful," indeed, more wonderful than the love David received from the women with whom he had been sexually involved. In support of this interpretation I would note in particular that David's comparison of the love Jonathan extended to him to the love women give to men fits well with the motif we have now seen several times in larger Samuel tradition, whereby Jonathan is imagined as womanlike or wifelike in relation to David. In particular we have seen this in passages that compare Jonathan to one of his sisters, either the sister who might have been David's bride, Merab, or the sister who actually became David's wife, Michal. Just to reiterate, these passages include

1. 1 Sam 18:1–4, in the variant account, where David rejects marriage with Saul's daughter Merab in favor, perhaps, of his relationship with Jonathan;

2. 1 Sam 19:1–7, in the primary account, where Jonathan's relationship with David mirrors the marriage relationship into which Saul's younger daughter Michal and David have entered in 1 Sam 18:20–29a;

3. the composite edition that brings together the variant and primary accounts of 1 Sam 18:1–4 and 1 Sam 19:1–7, in which these two texts' descriptions of Jonathan's "loving" interactions with David bracket the account of Michal's marriage to David, thereby suggesting a parallel between Michal's marital relationship with David and the marriage-like relationship David establishes with her brother;

4. 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42), in which Jonathan, in abetting David's attempts to escape Saul's murderous impulses, again mirrors Michal and her helping David to flee from Saul in 1 Sam 19:11–17.

Also to reiterate: several times in the larger Samuel tradition we have seen the same motif that I would see David expressing in his lament regarding the *superiority* of his relationship with Jonathan as compared to his relationships with women, especially his relationship with his wife Michal. In 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42), for example, the way in which David takes leave from Jonathan in a way that is far more emotionally charged than was his leave-taking from Michal in 1 Sam 19:11–17 signals that David's relationship with Jonathan has come to supersede his marriage relationship with Jonathan's sister. In addition, I have argued that this passage's description of Jonathan's working to save David from Saul's murderous impulses, when examined in relation to 1 Samuel's two other "saving David" passages—1 Sam 19:1–7 (Jonathan persuading Saul to spare David's life) and 1 Sam 19:11–17 (Michal helping David to flee from Saul's assassins)—shows how the Michal materials are bracketed, and thus rendered parenthetical, in relation to the materials that concern her brother; this same bracketing effect renders Michal parenthetical in the composite narrative of 1 Samuel 18 and 19, where the story of her marriage to David in 1 Sam 18:20–29a is bracketed between the two foregrounded stories of David's initial interactions with Jonathan in 1 Sam 18:1–4 and 1 Sam 19:1–7. Moreover, in both 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42) and 1 Sam 23:15–18 the use of the language of mutual commitment to describe David's and Jonathan's relationship alludes to the way that Jonathan's relationship with David has superseded David's relationship with Michal, in which her love for David went unreciprocated.⁹²

It is further the case that the lament's and the larger Samuel tradition's imagining of Jonathan as womanlike or wifelike in relation to David corresponds quite well to the ways in which male-male sexual interactions were conceived of in the ancient Mediterranean world, including the world of ancient Israel. As I have indicated already in [chapter 1](#), the ancient Israelites, like their ancient Mediterranean neighbors, subscribed to a sexual taxonomy based on the distinctions of active and passive, in which sexual intercourse was understood as an act of penile penetration that an active partner, obviously always male, performed upon a passive recipient. Typically, of course, this passive recipient was female, but the ancient Israelites certainly knew that it was possible to place a man in the sexually receptive position through an act of male-male anal intercourse. Because, however,

receptive partners were more typically female, all receptivity—whether receptivity as a part of male-female vaginal intercourse or receptivity in male-male anal intercourse—was defined in terms of the feminine. Thus, in the ancient Israelite imagination, to be the passive partner in a male-male sexual relation was to be feminized or rendered womanlike.⁹³ From this we might conclude the Samuel tradition's repeated intimations that Jonathan is womanlike or wifelike in relation to David are meant to indicate, as is some of the other imagery I have discussed above, that David and Jonathan were conceived of within their story as same-sex erotic partners, with David perceived as the active or masculinized member of the pair and Jonathan the feminized passive partner.

Why, then, does the Samuel tradition so frequently evoke homoeroticized and sexualized language and images in its depictions of David and Jonathan, and why do the language and images so frequently suggest that Jonathan is to be metaphorically understood as David's wife? Because, we might suggest, David and Jonathan were in fact imagined to be same-sex partners by the Samuel narratives and, moreover, same-sex partners who conformed to the ancient Israelite sexual understanding that same-sex acts between men were always performed by an active partner (David), conceptualized as male, upon a passive partner (Jonathan), imagined in terms of a feminized identity.

The Ambiguity of Eros

Unfortunately, there is an obvious problem with the proposal I have just outlined: that there is no indication the Samuel narrators view the relationship between David and Jonathan in any way negatively, whereas everywhere else in biblical tradition male-male sexual interactions are resolutely condemned, and precisely because of the feminization of the passive partner.⁹⁴ As I described in [chapter 1](#), that is, the ancient Israelites assumed not only that there was a rigid differentiation between the masculine (active) and feminine (passive) role in sexual intercourse but also that there was a "hierarchical nature of this differentiation."⁹⁵ Within this system of hierarchical differentiation the feminine or passive role—given the patriarchal worldview of ancient Israelite society—was considered inferior. Thus the feminization of the passive partner during the performance of male-male anal intercourse demoted that partner to a woman's inferior status and so was perceived to be a shameful and dishonoring act.

I have in addition already discussed in [chapter 1](#) the various biblical texts that demonstrate this understanding. We saw there, for example, how, in Gen 19:5, when the men of Sodom demand of Abraham's

nephew Lot, who sojourns in their midst, that he send out the two strangers to whom he had extended hospitality “so that we might know them” (in the biblical idiom, “so that we might have sexual intercourse with them”), what they are actually demanding is that Lot send forth his visitors so that the men of Sodom might place them sexually in a position of feminized passivity and thereby dishonor them by taking from them their male identity. We further saw in [chapter 1](#) how this same logic of sex and gender roles illuminates the kindred story of Judg 19:22–26 in which the Benjaminite tribesmen of the city of Gibeah similarly call for a member of the tribe of Ephraim who sojourns in their midst to send forth his houseguest, a member of the priestly tribe of Levi, for them “to know” (Judg 19:22). As in Gen 19:1–11, even to propose such an act is deemed an “outrage” according to the story (*nēbālā*; Judg 19:23),⁹⁶ for what such a request actually asks of the Ephraimite is that he send forth the Levite to assume the position of a female in sexual intercourse and so be demasculinized and dishonored by taking on “a position associated with lower status and power.”⁹⁷

I likewise noted in [chapter 1](#) how Lev 18:22 and Lev 20:13, the two biblical texts that explicitly forbid a man’s lying down with another man “the lying down of a woman,”⁹⁸ draw on this ancient Israelite cultural understanding that male-male intercourse improperly feminizes the passive or receptive partner. According in particular to Olyan, who has written extensively on these Leviticus texts, it is crucial to realize that, despite the typical interpretation that sees in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 an emphatic condemnation of all “homosexuality,” the specific (and only) same-sex sexual act Leviticus considers in 18:22 and 20:13 is the male-male analog of male-female vaginal intercourse, that is, male-male anal sex. Furthermore, as Olyan and also Ken Stone make clear, the reason male-male anal sex is forbidden according to the sexual logic of Lev 18:22 and 20:13 is because “it confuses the boundaries between gendered subject-object categories” the ancient Israelites considered normative in sexual relations.⁹⁹ It treats the male receptive partner in male-male anal intercourse, that is, as if he were a woman. As Stone writes, “This confusion is considered abominable to the authors of the Levitical codes, who went to great lengths to map out the distinctions and categories in terms of which the world ought to be ordered and to condemn any activity that was thought to disrupt this system of ordered purity.”¹⁰⁰

Olyan, moreover, persuasively argues that in Lev 18:22, which condemns only one of the partners who participates in an act of male-male anal intercourse, it is the active or penetrating partner who is sanctioned. Olyan further suggests that this Lev 18:22 formulation of the prohibition, rather than the formulation found in Lev 20:13, which

condemns both men who participate in anal intercourse, is the earlier.¹⁰¹ This is important for our purposes, because it indicates that in its origins the Leviticus tradition sought to castigate exactly those who are castigated in Gen 19:1–11 and Judg 19:22–26, men who proposed to place other men in a position of sexual submission and therefore dishonor them by rendering them female. Again we see, that is, that for a man to penetrate, or seek to penetrate, another man in an act of male-male anal intercourse is to violate, or threaten to violate, the receptive partner's male identity. The aggrieved suffers dishonor and shame and is thereby owed redress: the destruction of the city of the offending Sodomites, in Gen 19:12–26, the Israelites' waging a civil war against their offending countrymen, the Gibeahites, in Judg 20:1–48, the condemnation of the penetrating partner in Lev 18:22.

But what of the stories of David and Jonathan? In them, there is no hint that Jonathan, although he is often imagined as wifelike in his relationship with David, is placed in a position of dishonor or shame because of this feminization, nor is there any sense that David should be subject to castigation or that he owes redress because he has improperly demasculinized Jonathan. Rather, the text seems to imply just the opposite: that we as the text's audience are meant to apprehend David's and Jonathan's love for each other as the "wonderful" thing David describes it to be in the lament he sings after Saul and Jonathan have died (2 Sam 1:26). This fact has quite logically led many commentators to argue that the relationship of David and Jonathan, however eroticized and sexualized its language, cannot be understood as sexual in nature. In his recent study of the David materials, for example, Steven L. McKenzie writes, of the erotic language found in David's lament, "it is extremely unlikely that it is intended to describe a homosexual relationship" because "homosexual acts were condemned in Israelite law" whereas the David-Jonathan relationship is not.¹⁰² David M. Halperin also emphatically denies any homoerotic connotations in the language of David's lament and especially in the lament's line in which David compares the love of Jonathan favorably to the love of women. "This much-interpreted remark," Halperin claims, "would seem to mean *not* that David had sexual motives for preferring Jonathan's love to women's but rather that Jonathan's love for David was astonishing because—even *without* a sexual component—it was stronger and more militant than sexual love."¹⁰³

Similarly, Phyllis Bird, while acknowledging the affectionate quality of David's and Jonathan's feelings for one another, writes that "Jonathan's love for David (1 Sam. 18:1) does not belong to the OT's [Old Testament's] understanding of homosexual relations" because it does not involve the same sort of male-male sex acts that Gen 19:1–

11, Judg 19:22–26, and Lev 18:22 and 20:13 condemn.¹⁰⁴ Nissinen likewise points out that there is no indication in the David and Jonathan stories the two slept together “as one sleeps with a woman,” by which he means both that there is no indication of the two having sexual relations and also that, as womanlike as the depiction of Jonathan may be at points, there is no indication the relationship of David and Jonathan was fundamentally structured according to the dichotomy of active and passive so central elsewhere in biblical and ancient Mediterranean tradition. Nissinen therefore describes the David and Jonathan relationship according to the same paradigm of homosociability that he argued defined the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Gilgamesh Epic. In his words:¹⁰⁵

The relationship of David and Jonathan can be taken as an example of ancient oriental homosociability, which permits even intimate feelings to be expressed.... In these relationships, emotional partnership is emphasized, whereas erotic expressions of love are left in the background ... and there is no distinction between active and passive sexual roles.

Nevertheless, Nissinen admits that it is “conceivable to interpret David’s and Jonathan’s relationship as homoerotic,”¹⁰⁶ acknowledging, as I have catalogued in the first section of this chapter, that several examples of homoeroticized language and imagery can be found in the stories of David’s and Jonathan’s interactions. Halperin somewhat similarly concedes the point I have now noted several times, that the Samuel narrative is structured so as to suggest that David’s relationship with Jonathan replaces David’s conjugal relationship with Michal.¹⁰⁷ As I have already intimated, Halperin interprets this to mean that a nonsexual friendship replaces the sexual relationship of marriage, but as in his discussion of the Epic of Gilgamesh in the same essay he fails, in my estimation, to explain why this “fraternal” friendship (the term is Halperin’s) is depicted in such eroticized terms.¹⁰⁸ Likewise, Exum, who insists that David’s and Jonathan’s love “is not eros but *male bonding*,” says nothing about why this male bonding need be so eroticized.¹⁰⁹ Somewhat paradoxically, indeed, she quotes with approval Damrosch’s characterization of the David-Jonathan relationship as “friendship-as-marriage,”¹¹⁰ yet overlooks Damrosch’s observation that, “this relationship [between David and Jonathan] has been developed far beyond anything that would have been required simply to assure the audience that David and Jonathan were close friends.” The narrative, Damrosch goes on to say, depicts “an inner picture of intimacy” that “goes beyond the Yahwistic dynamics of brotherly relations.”¹¹¹ This is an assessment with which I

agree. The Samuel text is in tone erotically charged, and far more erotically charged than seems necessary or appropriate to describe the sort of nonsexual friendship that, because of the condemnation of male-male sexual interactions elsewhere in the biblical tradition, is advocated by interpreters such as McKenzie, Halperin, Nissinen, and Exum.



As in our discussion of the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, therefore, it seems we are left at something of an impasse. By all indications, sexual relations in the ancient Mesopotamian world were categorized according to the same hierarchical paradigm we have just been considering for ancient Israel, yet Gilgamesh and Enkidu are unremittingly portrayed as equals in the Gilgamesh Epic. This datum, as we saw in [chapter 3](#), has tended to stymie interpreters in their understanding of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship. Should Gilgamesh and Enkidu, given the highly eroticized and sexualized language used in the Epic of Gilgamesh to describe their interactions, be understood as sexual partners? Or, given these two characters' failure to conform to the normative pattern of Mesopotamian sexual relations, should they not? We face a similar (although not identical) dilemma here. David and Jonathan are described in the Samuel narratives using such highly eroticized language and imagery that it seems impossible in many respects *not* to interpret the text's depiction of their relationship as sexual in nature. Yet the positive way in which their relationship is portrayed so fails to conform to the way male-male sexual interactions are condemned elsewhere in biblical tradition that it seems equally impossible to conceive that we are, according to the Samuel tradition, to imagine David and Jonathan as sexual partners.

In addressing the impasse as we found it in the Epic of Gilgamesh, I suggested that understanding the rite-of-passage narrative structure that underlies the Gilgamesh text allows us to explain the non-normative occurrences of homoeroticized language and imagery within the Gilgamesh tradition. Under the terms of that proposal, the Gilgamesh Epic's use of highly eroticized language in its depictions of Gilgamesh and Enkidu makes sense *even though* the hierarchical paradigm we would expect in representations of Mesopotamian sexualized relationships is not present. In interpreting the David-Jonathan materials, as we will see in the first section of [chapter 8](#), the same explanation—dependent on a rites-of-passage analysis—will not yield as fully satisfying results. Still, as I will consider in the second section of the next chapter, the same general interpretive principle—

understanding the David and Jonathan story's homoeroticized language and imagery within the context of the larger narrative structure of the Samuel tradition and in a way that accords with Samuel's overall narrative strategy—will ultimately allow a successful negotiation of the impasse with which we currently seem confronted.

LIMINALITY AND BEYOND



Liminal Heroes?

I have indicated, at the end of the previous chapter, that the sort of rites-of-passage analysis I used in [chapters 4](#) and [5](#) to explain the homoeroticized language and imagery of the Gilgamesh Epic will not yield as fully satisfactory results in our investigation of the similar sorts of language and imagery found in the David and Jonathan stories. Nevertheless, I must admit that certain aspects of the Samuel narratives do conform well to the rites-of-passage template originally proposed by Arnold van Gennep and particularly to the descriptions of the rites-of-passage's liminal phase advanced by Victor Turner.

For example, the Samuel narratives' initial descriptions of, especially, David can be well explained using the analytical category of the rites-of-passage liminal phase. Certainly, the first of the two narratives that introduce David, 1 Sam 16:1–13, presents him in a very liminal way, as he is both depicted as the lowest of the low, as a shepherd boy and the youngest of many sons (vv 11), yet simultaneously described in the most exalted of terms, as the one designated by Israel's God Yahweh to be his people's next king (vv 12–13). Similarly, as this version of the "introducing David" story continues, in 1 Sam 17:12–31, 41, 48b, 50,¹ David is, on the one hand, represented as a relative nobody within Israelite society, a youngest son and shepherd boy whose only significant function within the Israel's commonwealth is to bring food to his older and socially more important brothers, who serve as soldiers in Saul's army (vv 14–15, 28). On the other hand, David is depicted as a particularly valiant fighter. Indeed, although just a shepherd boy, David is portrayed in 1 Sam 17:12–31, 41, 48b, 50 as a more able fighter than are all of the warriors who belong to Saul's entourage; David is the only one willing to take on the Philistine champion Goliath and also, presumably, the only one capable of defeating this strapping foe.

In the second (and primary) narrative strand found in the 1 Samuel tradition,² David likewise seems to be introduced as a liminal

character. Thus in 1 Sam 16:14–23, as in the 1 Samuel 17 text I just discussed, David is described both as a shepherd (1 Sam 16:19) and as a “nobleman” (1 Sam 16:18);³ he is, in addition, according to this same passage, a man who is preeminently skilled in both the arts of peace (the playing of the lyre) and of war. However, as this particular account of “David’s early days in Saul’s court” continues, in 1 Sam 17:1–11 and 32–40, it turns out that this warrior David, despite having been appointed Saul’s armor-bearer (1 Sam 16:21), is not so good with armor after all, as he finds himself unable to engage Goliath—unable even to walk!—while wearing the helmet, breastplate, and sword that Saul loans to him to use in his single-handed combat (1 Sam 17:38–39). Consequently David, although Saul’s armor-bearer, puts aside Saul’s armor in favor of the weapons of a shepherd, a staff and slingshot. Or we might say more abstractly that, in this primary version of the Goliath story, David puts aside one identity and fights according to another, although, after he triumphs, he arguably returns to the first (laying claim to Goliath’s armor as the spoils of his victory in 1 Sam 17:54, as typically would any warrior who vanquishes another). David by this account therefore represents a character who is neither fully courtier nor fully peasant, but rather one who “seems to shift and change,”⁴ in much the same way that “liminal entities,” according to Turner in *The Ritual Process*, “are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”⁵

In many respects these various liminal markers that are found in the narratives depicting David’s earliest days at court, both the narratives of the primary tradition and the variant, are reminiscent of the liminal markers that I suggested in [chapter 4](#) were present in the descriptions that introduce Gilgamesh and Enkidu in Tablet I of the Epic of Gilgamesh (for example, Gilgamesh as both king and barbarian; Enkidu as both animal and human). Yet even as I suggested in [chapter 4](#) that the Gilgamesh Epic’s introductory descriptions of both Gilgamesh and Enkidu were full of liminal imagery, I nonetheless insisted that the liminal phase of the Gilgamesh Epic truly began only about a third of the way through the Standard version’s Tablet II, in the aftermath of the wrestling-match scene in which the two heroes actually meet. Not until then, I argued, were Gilgamesh and Enkidu both separated, according to the language of van Gennep’s rites-of-passage structure, from the sets of conditions that had previously defined each’s existence (Gilgamesh from his harassing of Uruk’s citizenry, Enkidu from his rural homeland and the prostitute Shamhat); also, not until then, I argued, did the crisis that Gilgamesh’s oppressive behaviors had occasioned in Uruk begin to find the sort of redress that Turner associates with liminality in his paradigm of social drama.

In the Samuel narratives the matter is handled similarly we might suggest, especially in the variant tradition. In it, as I indicated above, aspects of David as a liminal character are introduced already in 1 Sam 17:12–31. However, it is not until 1 Sam 18:2 that we can actually speak—to use van Gennepe’s language—of David separating himself from his earlier set of social circumstances, by leaving his father’s household at Saul’s request and moving into the royal court. The same basic motif seems depicted in the primary tradition, although there it is significantly compressed. David, as I again indicated above, is initially identified in the primary tradition according to certain liminal markers in 1 Sam 16:18–19. Then, in 1 Sam 16:22, Saul sends to David’s father Jesse and requests that David become a part of the royal entourage. Thus David is separated from the conditions that had previously defined his existence. Alternatively, were we to use the language of Turner’s social drama model, we could propose that, in both the primary and variant tradition, the crisis that had emerged in the narrative in 1 Sam 15:23, 26–29—Yahweh’s rejection of Saul as king and of Saul’s descendants as Israel’s dynastic line—begins to find redress in 1 Samuel 16–18, as the king-to-be David moves into the royal court and begins to be associated with the office that will eventually be his.

Still, David, although now living in a kingly abode, is not yet king, and in both the primary narrative and the variant we can identify this betwixt-and-between status with regard to the crown as a crucial marker of the fully liminal phase within which David exists after leaving his father’s home. This is especially true in the primary narrative strand. In this account David’s position as Saul’s armor-bearer in his early days at court seems emphatically to position him as Saul’s subordinate (1 Sam 16:21), as does the David’s use of the term *servant* to describe himself in relation to the king (1 Sam 17:32, 34, 36). Yet in 1 Sam 18:7, as this primary tradition continues, the relationship is portrayed differently. This verse comes at a point in the narrative after David has defeated Goliath and the Israelite army more generally has battled successfully against the Philistines. As the army marches home from these endeavors, the women of Israel sing a victory chant to celebrate.⁶ Its words are “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands,” instead of the expected “*David* (the armor-bearer and subordinate) has killed his thousands, and *Saul* (the king and leader of the army) his ten thousands.” The women are saying, that is, that David has usurped King Saul’s place as Israel’s premier warrior and commander-in-chief, and this even though Saul is still king and that place is rightfully his. Or, in terms of the analysis we are pursuing here, we might again state more abstractly that the women’s song lauds David as if he occupied a

status-superior position with respect to Saul, even though he is in fact Saul's status inferior.

This episode thereby serves to propel David into an ambivalently charged set of interactions with Saul, as, according to 1 Sam 18:8–9, once Saul hears the women's victory chant, he begins to reassess his relationship with David. As a consequence, David finds himself caught between the status of being Saul's beloved armor-bearer and the status of being Saul's enemy. As the text of 1 Samuel 18 continues, especially in the primary narrative tradition, David is generally depicted as occupying the latter of these two positions, the enemy of Saul. Saul thus seeks to remove David from his presence (1 Sam 18:12–16) and to make David fall at the hands of the Philistines by requiring of him a bride-price of a hundred Philistine foreskins (1 Sam 18:25). In 1 Sam 19:7, however, Saul and David are reconciled, and "he (David) was in his presence as before." Yet, almost immediately, Saul's feelings turn again, and he seeks to pin David to the wall with a spear (1 Sam 19:10). It is at this point that first Michal, in 1 Sam 19:11–17, and then Jonathan, in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (in most of the Bible's English versions 20:1–42), abet David as he flees permanently from Saul's court.

We might compare this moment in the David story to the episode found at the beginning of Tablet IX of the Gilgamesh Epic when Gilgamesh, utterly bereft over Enkidu's death and convulsed with fear about his own mortality, leaves behind his own royal court in the city of Uruk. As I suggested in [chapter 4](#), the scenes that follow in the Gilgamesh Epic are particularly filled with liminal features, and so too do liminal markers begin to multiply in the story of David. After he leaves Uruk, for example, Gilgamesh is repeatedly described as "wandering," terminology I previously suggested implies a quality of aimlessness reminiscent of the ambiguity that characterizes liminality.⁷ Somewhat similarly does David seem constantly to move from place to place in Israel's southern region of Judah after he flees from Saul's court. At least sometimes, moreover, it seems he moves without any sense of where he is going or why. He flees to Ramah, just north of Saul's hometown of Gibeah, in 1 Sam 19:18, after Michal helps him escape from their bedchamber, then he returns (presumably) to Gibeah to rendezvous secretly with Jonathan, in 1 Sam 20:1. Next he leaves Gibeah for another nearby village, Nob, according to 1 Sam 21:2 (English 21:1).

After Nob, according to 1 Sam 21:11–22:5 (English 21:10–22:5), David begins to roam further afield, even ranging outside Judahite territory. In addition, his movements begin to be described in the text in a manner that feels almost frenetic. Thus David flees from Nob to the Philistine city of Gath, about twenty-five miles west and a little south, in 1 Sam 21:11 (English 21:10); then he goes from Gath back east ten

miles, to the cave (or perhaps “stronghold”) of Adullam, in southwestern Judah (1 Sam 22:1).⁸ Next, two verses later according to the text as we have it, he travels at least thirty to forty miles east across the Jordan River, into Moab (1 Sam 22:3), before returning, two verses later still, to Judah, to the “Forest of Hereth” (1 Sam 22:5).⁹ Homelessness, Turner has argued, is one of the characteristic experiences of liminality. If so, then David in 1 Sam 19:18–22:5 certainly seems to qualify as liminal.

Also striking in these 1 Sam 19:18–22:5 narratives is the degree to which crucial aspects of David’s identity seem confused. David Jobling carefully documents, for example, how ambivalently the story of David’s and Jonathan’s secret encounter in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42) treats the matter of David’s status as Israel’s future king. In 1 Sam 20:1, David comes before Jonathan as one comes before a sovereign, indeed, as David has previously come before Saul (1 Sam 16:21, 17:57, 19:7). Jonathan then decrees to David, “You shall not die” (1 Sam 20:2), a statement that Jobling proposes “exactly balances Saul’s ‘He shall not be put to death’” in 1 Sam 19:6.¹⁰ Moreover, as Jonathan continues speaking in 1 Sam 20:2, he explicitly identifies himself with King Saul—“My father does nothing great or small without revealing it to me”¹¹—and a few verses later David speaks of himself as “servant” to Jonathan (1 Sam 20:8), as elsewhere he has called himself or been called “servant” to Saul (1 Sam 17:32, 34, 36, 19:4).¹² In addition, in this same verse, David, apparently in an allusion to 1 Sam 18:1–4, recalls the covenant into which “you have brought your servant,” which is similar to language used elsewhere to speak of a covenant relationship an overlord has entered into with a subordinate (for example, Ps 89:4; English 89:3). Jonathan further presumes a kingly status in the fabricated story he tells Saul about David’s absence from the new moon feast, describing how he (Jonathan), acting as his father’s surrogate, received David’s petition to celebrate the festival with his family in Bethlehem and then granted his request (1 Sam 20:27–29).¹³ Finally, at the end of this 1 Samuel 20 passage, as David and Jonathan take their leave of one another, David falls to the ground as he comes forth from his hiding place outside Saul’s court, doing obeisance before Jonathan as would a subject before a king (1 Sam 20:41).¹⁴

However, Jobling suggests that Jonathan’s words to David in 1 Sam 20:13, “May Yahweh be with you, as he has been with my father,” imply that Jonathan has abdicated his rights as royal heir in favor of David. He further points out that Jonathan’s next words, asking David to deal faithfully with Jonathan and his descendants in the future, are the sort of petition an underling makes to his overlord, not a crown prince to an inferior.¹⁵ David also seems rather like a sovereign in 1

Sam 21:10 (English 21:9) when he takes the sword of Goliath from the shrine at Nob, where it apparently has been kept ever since David defeated the Philistine champion. In taking this weapon, David says, "There is none like it," seemingly indicating that it is the most noble (and thus the most kingly) in the land. According to the very next verses, moreover, David seems kingly enough that he is mistakenly identified as Israel's ruler when he goes to the Philistine city of Gath (1 Sam 21:11–12; English 21:10–11). Like a king, too, David gathers followers around him (1 Sam 22:2). Yet these followers are hardly the nobility that typically make up a king's entourage; rather, they are said to be those in dire straits, those in debt, and those bitter of spirit. And of course David, no matter how noble his position as "captain" (*šar*) over them, is in fact a fugitive.

As the story continues, in 1 Sam 23:1–24:8 (English 23:1–24:7), several other motifs are introduced that arguably point to David's increasingly liminal nature. First we can note that, according to the tradition, David, although he has technically been a fugitive since the time Michal lowered him from their bedroom window (1 Sam 19:11–17), is not described, in the chapters that immediately follow that episode, as being actually pursued by Saul (assuming here, as I noted in [chapter 7](#), that 1 Sam 19:18–24, which describes Saul and his messengers seeking David in Ramah, is secondary to the original text). Beginning in 1 Sam 23:1–14, though, we find a set of stories that portray Saul as actively in pursuit of David. Saul first seeks David at the village of Keliath, which is on the border of Judah and the territory of the Philistines (1 Sam 23:7–8), and, after David escapes from Keliath, Saul chases after him in the wilderness of Ziph, several miles to the south and east (1 Sam 23:14). David eludes Saul there, and in the more southerly wilderness of Maon as well, even after some Ziphites reveal to Saul his whereabouts (1 Sam 23:19–28). Saul, though, does not relent: after a brief interlude, during which he is called away in order to repulse a Philistine raid (1 Sam 23:28), Saul seeks David in the wilderness of Engedi, on the southwestern shore of the Dead Sea (1 Sam 24: 2–3; English 24:1–2). From the point of view of a rites-of-passage analysis, it is very tempting to describe David as being forced here to undergo the sorts of onerous tests and trials that are so typically imposed on liminal entities, forced, that is, to face (repeatedly) a murderous threat and somehow overcome it. We might remember, moreover, that typically a liminal entity's tests and trials are imposed by some sort of ritual leader. Most typically, we might also remember, these leaders are members of the liminal person's community, who, although they are not themselves participants in the liminal person's rite of passage, somehow assume authority over the liminal experience. Yet among communities where there are no such

leaders, Turner argues that the role of the ritual leader can be assumed by an otherworldly agent.¹⁶ It is tempting to suggest that Yahweh plays this role in 1 Samuel by plaguing Saul with an “evil spirit” (1 Sam 16:14, 15, 16, 23, 19:9) that compels him relentlessly in his obsessive pursuit of David.

At the same time, however, that Yahweh is arguably compelling Saul in his obsessive attempts to kill David, Yahweh is described in the narrative as directly intervening in this-worldly affairs to help David triumph in his ordeals. Indeed, four separate times in 1 Sam 23:1–14 alone, David makes ritual inquiries in order to learn from Yahweh what he should do in the face of the challenges that confront him; on each of these four occasions Yahweh responds (1 Sam 23:2, 4, 11, and 12; cf. 1 Sam 28:6, in which Yahweh refuses to answer Saul). Yahweh further is described in 1 Sam 23:14 as working to protect David by not giving him into Saul’s hands. In the terms of the rites-of-passage analysis in which we are engaged, we might say that what we are seeing here is evidence of the experience of divine inspiration and revelation typically enjoyed by liminal entities.¹⁷ We should recall in this regard that, while it might initially seem paradoxical to claim that Yahweh, the same otherworldly entity whose “evil spirit” is arguably the cause of David’s tests and trials, simultaneously takes responsibility for delivering David from harm, this sort of dual role, as I described in [chapter 4](#), is precisely analogous to the dual role as instigator and deliverer that Shamash plays in the course of Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s expedition against Huwawa/Humbaba. It is in addition exactly the sort of dual role that Turner ascribes generally to the ritual leaders in a rite of passage. These leaders both impose upon their liminal charges numerous trials and trials yet also provide to these charges the crucial *sacra* or divine knowledge they need in order to overcome their ordeals.

I further noted in [chapter 4](#) that in ancient Near Eastern tradition a liminal entity’s experiences of divine inspiration and revelation often take place in wilderness locations, because according to the ancient Near Eastern worldview, to quote (as in [chapter 4](#)) Edmund Leach, “such places stand at the boundary between This World and The Other and are therefore appropriate places for a meeting between the natural and the supernatural.”¹⁸ It is striking in this regard the degree to which 1 Sam 23:1–24:8 (English 23:1–24:7) stresses a wilderness setting: David moves from Keliash to the wilderness (*midbār*) of Ziph (1 Sam 23:14), then further south, to the wilderness (*midbār*) of Maon (1 Sam 23:24), then east into the wilderness (*midbār*) of En-gedi (1 Sam 24:2; English 24:1). According, moreover, to the Hebrew text of 1 Sam 25:1, he travels from these locations even deeper into the wilderness space, into the desolate and uninhabited wilderness (*midbār*) of Paran in the northeastern region of the Sinai Peninsula. Given that David is

reported back in the wilderness of Maon, in southern Judah, in the next verse, most scholars assume the Hebrew tradition has been corrupted at this point and that we should read “the wilderness of Maon” in 1 Sam 25:1, as, indeed, does the ancient Greek translation of 1 Samuel.¹⁹ I cannot necessarily disagree with this consensus, but I would nevertheless point out that there is much that is compelling about the reading Paran from a rites-of-passage perspective. According to such an interpretation, the Samuel narrative is moving David geographically into progressively more barren and isolated wilderness spaces at the same time that it is compounding the number of motifs in David’s story that correspond to Turner’s descriptions of liminality. As David becomes more and more paradigmatically a liminal being in the 1 Samuel materials, he appears to be located more and more by the narrative in the sort of wilderness space that is paradigmatic for liminality in ancient Near Eastern tradition.²⁰

Other textual difficulties in this part of the 1 Samuel account are also intriguing to consider in relation to a rites-of-passage paradigm. In 1 Sam 24:2–23 (English 24:1–22), and again in 1 Sam 26:1–25, stories are told of how Saul comes close to achieving success in his pursuit of David, or at least how he manages to come, along with his army, into the immediate proximity of David’s hiding place. On each occasion, however, the tables of the pursuit story are turned, so that David becomes the hunter rather than the hunted. Thus David manages stealthily to approach Saul and cut off a corner of his robe in the first narrative (1 Sam 24:5; English 24:4) and in the second he spirits Saul’s spear and water-jar away from Saul’s side while Saul sleeps (1 Sam 26:12). In both instances David uses this booty to make clear to Saul that he had been close enough to have murdered the king (1 Sam 24:12; English 24:11, 26:15–16). He further makes clear that he refrained from doing so because he still considers himself a loyal subject of Saul’s and asks, somewhat plaintively in each case, why—given his fidelity—Saul has insisted on pursuing him (1 Sam 24:9–16; English 24:8–15, 26:17a–20). In both accounts, Saul admits that he has behaved unjustly and reconciles with David, leaving off his pursuit to return home (1 Sam 24:17–23; English 24:16–22, 26:21–25). In the first story (1 Sam 24:21–22; English 24:20–21) Saul in addition acknowledges that David will someday be king and sovereign over his descendants.

For P. Kyle McCarter this declaration, found in the first account in 1 Sam 24:21–22 (English 24:20–21), serves as the key to the interpretation of both the “David spares Saul” stories. He takes the second story in 1 Sam 26:1–25 to be the older and understands the first story in 1 Sam 24:2–23 (English 24:1–22) to be a tendentious retelling inserted by a later editor who, by demonstrating that Saul

himself came to recognize David as Israel's future sovereign and thus subordinated the rights of his descendants to David's, sought to erase any doubts about the legitimacy of David's kingship and to counter any claims to the throne that could be advanced on behalf of a Saulide dynasty.²¹ The advantage of this sort of interpretation is that it accounts well for the rather enormous narrative inconsistencies that exist in the text as it now stands, in which, in the aftermath of the "Saul defers to David" narrative of 1 Sam 24:2–23 (English 24:1–22) as we have it, David almost immediately finds himself again pursued by Saul as if he were still the king's enemy (1 Sam 26:1–2). The disadvantages, however, are, first, that this interpretation ascribes to the redactor who allegedly incorporated the 1 Sam 24:2–23 narrative (English 24:1–22) only the most mediocre of literary talent, so that he inserted his story of Saul's reconciliation with David into the 1 Samuel complex in such a wooden way and so without attention to the larger context that it sticks out like the proverbial sore thumb. Second, this interpretation fails to explain why narrative inconsistencies are also associated with the older 1 Sam 26:1–25 reconciliation story, as, immediately after that story's supposedly happy ending, David perceives himself still to be in danger from Saul and so flees to Philistia to escape from the king's persecution (1 Sam 27:1).

What, though, if we interpret in order to suggest the inconsistencies in 1 Sam 24:2–23 (English 24:1–22), 26:1–25, and the related chapters are precisely the point: what if, that is, the changing portrayal of David as the enemy, and then the ally, and then again the enemy, and then again the ally, and then once more the enemy of Saul were taken as evidence of the liminal character of David in these chapters, serving as yet another indication of the betwixt-and-between existence that David experiences in this part of the 1 Samuel tradition? Indeed, this is exactly the interpretation I have suggested above regarding 1 Sam 18:12–21:1 (English 18:12–20:42), chapters in which David, while still resident at court (or at least hiding out in close proximity to it), also bounces between an identity as Saul's enemy and an identity as Saul's beloved. The materials found in 1 Sam 24:2–27:1 (English 24:1–27:1) seem in many respects just an exaggerated version of this same pattern, exaggerated, I might suggest, because all the narrative's markers of liminality have become exaggerated at this point: the dangers David faces at Saul's hands have become greater and greater, the role played by Yahweh as ritual leader has become larger and larger, the wilderness locations in which David's ordeals take place have become increasingly more barren and isolated, and David, although he is the king to be, lives less and less like a sovereign in waiting and more and more like an outlaw and outcast.²²

It is while David lives more and more like an outlaw and an outcast

that he is visited by Jonathan for the last meeting the two have in their lifetimes (1 Sam 23:15–18). Notably, moreover, all four of these two heroes' encounters occur within what I have just described as the liminal part of the Samuel narrative. The two first meet, at least according to the shorter variant account, just as David is separated from his life as a shepherd boy in the house of his father Jesse (1 Sam 18:1–4). They continue to interact, according to the primary narrative strand, during David's betwixt-and-between days in Saul's court (1 Sam 19:1–7) and during David's liminal experiences as a wanderer (1 Sam 20:1–21:1; English 20:1–42) and in the wilderness (1 Sam 23:15–18). Jonathan in addition is arguably portrayed as liminal himself from 1 Sam 18:1–4 onward. For example, as I have previously noted, he sometimes acts as if he were David's sovereign, yet at other points he is imagined as David's subordinate, even at times within the same story (1 Sam 20:1–21:1; English 20:1–42). More significant still is the Samuel narrative's description of Jonathan's relationship with Saul. At points Jonathan deliberately defies his father in order to act in solidarity with David. He lies to Saul, for instance, in 1 Sam 20:28–29. Yet Jonathan does not flee with David when the latter abandons Saul's court in 1 Sam 21:1 (English 20:42). Nor does Jonathan ever seem to consider that his proper place might be anywhere other than at his father's side, and thus he fights together and dies with Saul in battle against the Philistines (1 Sam 31:2–4).²³

What these various data suggest with regard to our analysis here is that we should understand the David-Jonathan relationship—which takes place wholly within liminal time and liminal space and whose two participants are each well described as liminal characters—as itself liminal. It then becomes tempting to argue that the anomalous way in which homoeroticized innuendo is treated in the Samuel narratives—positively, rather than negatively, as it is everywhere else in biblical tradition—is part and parcel of this liminal experience, in which, to quote Turner, “ordinary constructions of common sense” are “reconstructed in novel ways.”²⁴ More specifically: I posited in [chapter 4](#) that the liminal structure of the Epic of Gilgamesh allows—in fact, even requires—that the eroticized and sexualized representations of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship *not* conform to the hierarchical paradigm that is otherwise normative for erotic and sexual relationships in the Mesopotamian world. Somewhat analogously, we can posit here that the liminal structure found within the 1 Samuel materials allows—in fact, requires—that the narrative tradition present the homoeroticized nature of David's interactions with Jonathan in a positive manner that is contrary to the negative way male-male sexual interactions are presented in Israelite texts outside a liminal framework.

Within liminality, I quoted Turner in [chapter 4](#) as writing, “the classifications on which order normally depends are annulled or obscured.”²⁵ As we saw in [chapter 7](#), a crucial classification on which ancient Israelite sexual order normally depended was the proper observance of gender roles, with men assuming only the active role in sexual intercourse and women assuming only the passive. The repeated violation of these norms in the David-Jonathan stories, as Jonathan, although male, is over and over depicted as wifelike in relation to David, would ordinarily evoke condemnation in Israelite tradition. But within a liminal context, as Turner’s analysis would predict, the violation of the norms becomes, in a sense, the norm, so that an eroticized and sexualized male-male relationship that, outside liminal time and space, would seem in the Israelite worldview “bizarre,” even “to the point of monstrosity,” becomes in this instance acceptable and even commendatory.²⁶ Their love was “wonderful,” David says in the lament he sings following Jonathan’s death (2 Sam 1:26), and my point here is that, whatever the normative Israelite view, within the liminal context of the Samuel materials, David’s assessment is right. Within liminality a relationship that would otherwise seem condemnatory is praised.



The liminal imagery of the 1 Samuel narrative all culminates, perhaps, in 1 Sam 27:1–2, when David becomes an outcast from his own country, fleeing Judahite territory to enlist in the service of King Achish, who rules over the Philistine city of Gath. From a rites-of-passage perspective, a particularly impressive “confusion of all the customary categories” seems to be introduced here:²⁷ is David now Israelite or a member of the community of Israel’s most despised enemies, the Philistines? Achish certainly takes David as Philistine, giving him the city of Ziklag in exchange for his military service in 1 Sam 27:6 and assuming that David will fight as his ally when the Philistines assemble for war against Israel in 1 Sam 28:1–2. Achish’s warlords, however, believe that David’s loyalties ultimately lie with the Israelites, and they do not trust David to serve among them in the battle against Israel in which they are about to engage (1 Sam 29: 3–5).

And what of David himself? During his sixteen months with Achish (1 Sam 27:7), he engages in a program of massive deception. He wages war raids, as his position as Achish’s mercenary requires that he do, and enriches Achish with the plunder from these raids (sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels, clothing), as again his mercenary position requires (1 Sam 27:9). When Achish asks him about the victims of his raids,

David consistently claims that he has been attacking Achish's foes in nearby Israelite settlements, in the southern region of Judah (1 Sam 27:10). In fact, however, he has been attacking non-Israelite communities, and, in at least one instance, he has attacked a non-Israelite community that was otherwise an enemy of Israel and consequently, by default, an ally of the Philistines (the Amalekites; 1 Sam 27:8). David, moreover, when told by Achish that the Philistine king expects him to march with the Philistines against the Israelites, says in reply, "You will learn what your servant will do!" (1 Sam 28:2). This Achish takes as a profession of loyalty to him—that Achish will learn the extent of David's fidelity—whereas David actually means to say that, in the throes of battle, Achish will learn that David has remained loyal to his native land.²⁸ Similarly, in 1 Sam 29:8, Achish assumes that when David says he will "fight against the enemies of my lord the king," it means David will fight with his lord Achish against Israel. But David's words might rather mean, as Marti J. Steussy points out, that David intends to fight for King Saul against Philistia.²⁹

At one level, in terms of the analysis we have been pursuing, David's actions here seem consistent with, and even emblematic of, the liminal characteristics that have defined him, arguably, from the point when he was first introduced in the narrative in 1 Sam 16:1–13. Thus David stands positioned betwixt and between a Philistine and Israelite identity. Yet it is extremely important to realize that liminal entities are perhaps best described as "caught" or "trapped" between identities, with the implication that the loss of power and authority that comes with liminality *forces* liminal entities into status-ambivalent positions they do not (and would not necessarily) choose for themselves. Liminal entities, in Turner's words, are marked by "passivity" and "submissiveness"; they are "clay or dust, mere matter" who, in the course of their rites of passage, are less actors and more acted upon.³⁰ This is *not* the shrewd and conniving David who dupes Achish regarding his ethnic loyalties.³¹ Nor is it the shrewd and conniving David who, in a subsequent scene in 1 Samuel (1 Sam 30:26–31), gives some of the booty captured in a raid against the Amalekites to the elders of Judah. Because David's gift to these elders earns him their loyalty, and because this loyalty will be of enormous importance to David later, in 2 Sam 2:4, as he assumes the throne over the Judahite tribes of Israel's southern region, we have to see David's actions in 1 Sam 30:26–31 as carefully calculated, the deeds of an agent who works to take charge of and effect his own destiny, rather than the deeds typical of a liminal entity who submits passively as the events engineered by the community's ritual elders (whether human or otherworldly) unfold around him. David's cleverness in these passages, moreover, stands in stark contrast to the attribute of

“foolishness” or nonsagacity that Turner, in *The Ritual Process*, includes in a list of the features of liminality.³²

How to explain the deviations from the expected rites-of-passage pattern that we find in the descriptions of David's actions in 1 Sam 27:8–28:2 and 30:26–31? One possibility is to suggest that, by 1 Samuel 27, liminality within the narrative structure is beginning to come to an end, so that the liminal attributes that have previously defined David's character and the nature of his existence begin to erode and even to disappear. Given that Saul, who holds the throne that David is to assume, and Jonathan, Saul's presumptive heir, are soon to die fighting against the Philistines (1 Sam 31:2–4)—and also that two other of Saul's sons are killed in this battle—this possibility has much to recommend it: with the current occupant of the throne and three of its main claimants dead, the path seems clear for David to assume the office of Israel's king and so, shortly after 1 Sam 31:2–4, to complete the status transition from shepherd to monarch that has been in process since 1 Sam 16:1–13.

According to 2 Sam 2:1–5:5, however, David's status transition is not effected as quickly and neatly as the events of 1 Sam 31:2–4 might adumbrate. Saul does have one surviving son, called in the tradition Eshbaal or Ishboshet, and, according to 2 Sam 2:8–11, Abner, the commander of Saul's army, moves after Saul's and Jonathan's deaths to have this Eshbaal or Ishboshet anointed as king over the northern tribes of the Israelite confederacy.³³ David, meanwhile, reigns in the South, in Judah (2 Sam 2:4). This situation, in which David reigns only over the southern territory of Judah, persists, according to biblical chronology, for seven and a half years, until David becomes king over the North as well (2 Sam 2:11, 5:5).³⁴ Arguably, according to a rite-of-passage logic, David is still at least somewhat liminal for these seven and a half years, until his ascension to the combined throne of Judah and Israel is completed in 2 Sam 5:1–5.³⁵ Arguably, therefore, it becomes problematic to explain the less than liminal aspects of David's actions in 1 Sam 27:8–28:2 and 30:26–31 as indicative of David's movement out of a liminal existence even before Saul's and Jonathan's demise.

We might in addition note in this regard some of the other less than liminal aspects of the David story even during what I have characterized as the narrative's liminal phase. In the same list of liminal features from *The Ritual Process* that I mentioned above, for example, Turner includes the “suspension of kinship rights and obligations,”³⁶ but the seemingly liminal David, in the midst of his flight from Saul, makes arrangements for his father and mother to dwell in safety in Moab until his fate in Israel is clear (1 Sam 22:3–4). Turner also includes as four separate items in his catalog of liminal features

“homogeneity,” “equality,” “absence of status,” and “absence of rank,” yet David, as I have noted, is labeled the *śar*, or “captain,” of his wilderness entourage, an entourage made up, granted, of the outcasts of society, but an entourage of which David is leader all the same (1 Sam 22:2). Another item of Turner’s list is “sexual continence,” yet David marries during his time in the wilderness, twice (1 Sam 25: 39–43).³⁷

Such less than liminal aspects of David’s wilderness existence come into even clearer relief when compared to the manifestations of liminality we found in the Epic of Gilgamesh. We might note, for example, that, while David, after he is separated from Saul’s court according to rites-of-passage interpretation we have been pursuing, wanders in the wilderness as does Gilgamesh after he abandons Uruk in the Gilgamesh Epic, David never wanders as utterly separated from all aspects of his identity as does Gilgamesh.³⁸ Thus, even while in the liminal space of the wilderness, David retains his earlier identity as a mighty warrior: armed with a noble weapon (the sword of Goliath), attended by a entourage that fights at his side, and, most important, prevailing in military endeavors. He prevails against the Amalekites and other non-Israelite groups in 1 Sam 27:8, as I have mentioned, and, even more significantly (given that this occurs squarely in the midst of what is arguably the narrative’s liminal phase), he delivers the oppressed city of Keliath in 1 Sam 23:1–5. Compare Gilgamesh, who during his wilderness wanderings after leaving Uruk can barely be recognized as a human, much less as a hero. He is, rather, portrayed as both animal-like and as a corpse (like animals, he is covered with matted hair and eats flesh for food; like a corpse, he is unanointed and wears tatters). The alewife Siduri, when she first lays eyes upon him, is so scared by his appearance that she bars her door (Tablet X, lines 1–14). We might contrast the point in David’s wilderness wanderings when he encounters a woman, Abigail, wife of Nabal, who—when she hears that David is in her vicinity—loads up donkeys with abundant provisions and goes forth to meet him, making obeisance before him when she comes into his presence (1 Sam 25:18–25).

I will have more to say about what I consider this important Abigail episode in the third section of this chapter, but, for the time being, let us continue to consider how markedly certain aspects of the story of David in the wilderness contrast to the demonstrably liminal features of the Gilgamesh account. Unlike Gilgamesh, David never arrives at utterly otherworldly (and thus utterly liminal) spaces (for example, the interior of Mount Mashu and the sea with the perilous waters of death that lie in its midst), and, unlike Gilgamesh, David never encounters utterly otherworldly (and thus utterly liminal) beings (for example, the theriomorphic scorpion-men). Rather, David comes closest to such a

confrontation only *before* his wilderness adventures, when he engages in combat against the fearsome Goliath.³⁹ Also note that David's wilderness trials in escaping Saul, although onerous, are in no way as onerous as are Gilgamesh's wilderness ordeals. Indeed, Gilgamesh, toward the end of his series of trials, twice fails to triumph in the tests set for him (he cannot pass Utnapishtim's test of staying awake for six days and seven nights, nor is he able to lay claim to the restorative powers offered by the magical Plant of Rejuvenation). But David *always* succeeds, even when things look most bleak (in 1 Sam 24:2–23; English 24:1–22, and 26:1–25, when Saul comes, along with three thousand of his chosen troops, into the immediate proximity of David's hiding places).

By the time he loses the Plant of Rejuvenation, Gilgamesh, I indicated in [chapter 5](#), is so wholly “ground down” by his liminal ordeals, just as Turner's model of liminality would predict, that he is finally able to learn the truths of human existence necessary for him to be reaggregated into his community and resume his position as king, and as a king, moreover, who has been transformed by his liminal experiences from an irresponsible ruler to a model monarch. David, however, even though he arguably has experiences in the Samuel narratives that qualify as liminal, is in no way as profoundly changed as is Gilgamesh by the trials he undergoes, and one gets the sense that the sort of king David is once he ascends the combined throne of Judah and Israel in 2 Sam 5:1–5 is just the sort of king he would have been had he become monarch immediately after he was first introduced in the narrative and identified as Saul's successor in 1 Samuel 16.⁴⁰ In fact, in 2 Sam 5:2, as David is being crowned as king over the tribes of the North, he is lauded by the Israelites as the one who was designated by Yahweh to be the “shepherd over my people.” Given that the image of king as shepherd is practically ubiquitous in ancient Near Eastern literature, including the literature of the Bible, this is a perfectly acceptable and even expected metaphor for a text that concerns a sovereign's coronation to evoke.⁴¹ Yet here in 2 Sam 5:2 it takes on added significance, as David, of course, entered the narrative as an actual shepherd in 1 Sam 16:1–13 and continued to manifest this identity early in the story of his days in Saul's court, both in the primary and variant narrative traditions (1 Sam 16:19, the primary tradition, and 1 Sam 17:15, 28, the variant).

This has important implications within the context of our current discussion, as it demonstrates in a nutshell the point I put forward above: that, although David is arguably characterized as liminal in certain respects in the narratives of 1 Samuel and arguably undergoes certain liminal experiences, he is nevertheless basically the same shepherd before the liminal phase of his story begins that he is as his

liminal status, in 2 Sam 5:1–5, apparently comes to an end. Gilgamesh, conversely, by the end of his story, becomes a king of a quite different sort than the reckless and irresponsible monarch he was in his story's opening scenes. Another text that illustrates in a nutshell the different ways in which liminality is ultimately manifest in the Gilgamesh Epic and the Samuel narratives is 2 Sam 1:11–12, where David and his followers, after hearing of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, engage in the sort of mourning rituals characteristic of liminality (tearing their clothes, weeping, and fasting). They thereby separate themselves from their normal positions within their community's social structure by separating themselves from normal markers of status (appropriate clothing) and from normal human behaviors (eating). Gilgamesh, of course, does much the same when Enkidu dies, tearing out his hair and stripping off his royal garments (Tablet VIII, lines 62–63). Yet while Gilgamesh persists in these liminal behaviors far beyond the weeklong period of mourning prescribed in Mesopotamian tradition, David and his men maintain their liminal identity as mourners only part of one day, and this even though other biblical texts, including other texts in the Samuel tradition (1 Sam 31:13), suggest that the ancient Israelites, like the people of Mesopotamia, typically observed seven days of mourning.⁴² If Gilgamesh, throughout the Epic of Gilgamesh and especially in its culminating tablets, might be described as hyperliminal, so extreme and extensive are his liminal behaviors and experiences, David, throughout the story of his rise to power and especially in its culminating moments, might be described as only marginally so.

It thus seems to me that, while liminal imagery and the rites-of-passage pattern are somewhat represented in the Samuel narratives of David's ascension to kingship, and in fact at certain points are strongly represented (and, whatever my caveats above, I do not wish to deny this), this liminal imagery and rites-of-passage pattern are *not* as powerfully and even pristinely present in the David story as they were in the Gilgamesh Epic. Nor, I might add, are liminal imagery and the rites-of-passage pattern as powerfully present in the 1 Samuel materials as I believe they are elsewhere in the biblical tradition, in, for example, the story of the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt and their transformation from slaves into a free people (after, notably, forty years of wilderness tests, trials, and sacred revelations).⁴³ These observations raise the possibility, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, that liminal imagery and the rites-of-passage pattern might *not* fully inform the Samuel narrative's use of eroticized and sexualized language and imagery in the stories that describe the relationship of David and Jonathan. Indeed, if we focus for a moment on some of the details of the various David-Jonathan episodes, we can

see that, as in the 1 Samuel narrative as a whole, the rites-of-passage pattern and liminality are less than perfectly represented. Comparing the way liminal motifs are manifest in the Epic of Gilgamesh again makes this particularly clear.

I argued in [chapter 5](#) that the Gilgamesh Epic, as part of its liminally based depictions of Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's relationship, insisted on describing these two heroes as equals, as representatives, that is, of the typically liminal experiences of homogeneity and egalitarianism. I further maintained there that, as Turner's paradigm would predict, this liminal experience of homogeneity and egalitarianism helped facilitate a narrative vision of what Turner calls *communitas*, the experience of utter and absolute fellowship and solidarity that liminal persons typically enjoy. Yet while David and Jonathan certainly can be said to enjoy experiences of fellowship and solidarity, their interactions are nevertheless not comparable to the *communitas*-like interactions of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. David and Jonathan, for example, are not well described as equals.⁴⁴ To be sure, as I have earlier noted, their status relationship to one another is unclear, so that at some points Jonathan appears the kingly one in relation to David, while at other points David appears sovereign over Jonathan. Still, the idea that there is a status relationship to be negotiated between David and Jonathan is never abandoned, whereas in the egalitarianism of *communitas*, as Turner understands it, "distinctions of rank or status disappear or are homogenized."⁴⁵

David and Jonathan also do not manifest the same single-minded and exclusionary focus on one another as do Gilgamesh and Enkidu. As I noted above, for example, Jonathan, however great his devotion to David, never so throws in his lot with David that he abandons his father Saul in order to live with David's outlaw band. Indeed, every interaction Jonathan has with David somehow involves Saul. Saul takes David into his house at the same time Jonathan is coming to love and make a covenant with him (1 Sam 18:1–4). Jonathan intercedes with Saul twice on David's behalf once Saul's delight in David turns to enmity (1 Sam 19:1–7 and 20:1–21:1; English 20:1–42). Jonathan meets with David one last time before he (Jonathan) dies in order to encourage David as David tries to escape from Saul's relentless pursuit (1 Sam 23:15–18). Even upon the occasion of Jonathan's death, Saul is still a looming presence, as David laments the two jointly. "O Saul and Jonathan ... in their death, they are not separated," he sings (2 Sam 1:23), just as Jonathan seems never to have been separated from Saul, or at least from the thought of Saul, throughout the course of his interactions with David.

In fact, so present is Saul in the stories of David's and Jonathan's interactions that Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli see in the Samuel

narratives a love triangle, with both Saul and Jonathan in love with David and in competition for his affections (an idea also explored by André Gide, in his 1896 play *Saül*).⁴⁶ Yet while such an interpretation has the advantage of explaining some of the Samuel tradition's language and imagery (especially 1 Sam 16:22, where it is said that Saul "loved" [*āhēb*] David), it surely imposes (as Schroer and Staubli are wont to do) far too much of our modern sensibility regarding the possible configurations of sexual relationships back onto the world of ancient Israel.⁴⁷ Still Schroer's and Staubli's sense that the David-Jonathan relationship is not as exclusionary as a liminal relationship of heroic companions should be, as well as the lack of liminal egalitarianism manifest in David's and Jonathan's interactions, suggests, as I indicated above, that a rites-of-passage analysis may not wholly account for the use of eroticized and sexualized language and imagery in the stories of David and Jonathan. As we will see in the following section, a fuller explanation requires us to understand that, in addition to a rites-of-passage framework, there is an even more dominant structuring principle at work in the 1 Samuel narratives on which I have focused, the principle of apologetic.

Erotic Apologetic

In his recent study of the David story, Steven L. McKenzie entitled his chapter on the Bible's account of David's life "Royal Propaganda."⁴⁸ By this McKenzie means, as argued most fully and persuasively by McCarter,⁴⁹ that the story of David's ascent to the combined throne of Israel and Judah is apologetic in tone, an attempt by David's biographers to justify David's right to rule over Israel's northern and southern regions despite the strong claims that surely could be advanced by David's detractors on behalf of the dynasty of Saul. In particular, David's biographers, as McKenzie (following McCarter) sees it, "function to legitimate David as Saul's successor by answering charges against him."⁵⁰ To defend David against those who might condemn him as an outlaw, for example, the David story insists that he was rather an unwilling fugitive from Saul's court, forced by Saul's irrational jealousy into a life of banditry and brigandage. Similarly, to defend David against those who might condemn David as a Philistine ally, the David story presents him as one who fled to Philistia only as a last resort and, while there, worked secretly on behalf of his Israelite brethren by conducting war raids against Israel's enemies.⁵¹ According to this understanding, the stories of David's interactions with Jonathan, too, are to be read in terms of apologetic:⁵² David did not, as his potential detractors might claim, malevolently usurp the Israelite throne

from Jonathan, the rightful heir; rather, Jonathan voluntarily abdicated whatever claims to kingship he might have had because of his great devotion to David. This devotion, the narrative implies, its audience—and especially those members of its audience who might otherwise question David's right to rule—should extend to David and to his dynasty as well.

We have seen, moreover, that, according to the readings I suggested in the last chapter, Jonathan's devotion to David should be described both in terms of political loyalty and personal affection. It is, of course, obvious how the passages from the David-Jonathan stories that focus primarily on Jonathan's political loyalty function in accord with the apologetic reading we are considering here: David cannot be accused of forcibly taking the throne from the legitimate crown prince Jonathan because Jonathan willingly gave his fealty to David. So, therefore, is the narrative's audience told that David is in fact their rightful king and that they owe him and his dynasty the same fealty Jonathan has offered. More specifically, in 1 Sam 18:4, as Jonathan gives over to David the royal symbols of robe, battle garb, sword, bow, and belt and thus relinquishes any claim he might make to the throne, so too is the message to the narrative's audience that they should relinquish any claims they might advance on behalf of Jonathan and his descendants in favor of the claims of the dynasty of David. Likewise, as Jonathan acts as a subordinate to David's sovereign in 1 Sam 20:13–15, so too, the argument of the apologetic urges, should the ancient Israelites acknowledge David and his descendants as rightfully their overlords and so subordinate themselves willingly to the Davidic dynasty's rule. Also in 1 Sam 23:17, just as Jonathan voluntarily accepts that David is to be king over Israel while Jonathan serves as his second-in-command, so too, according to the logic of the apologetic, should the narrative's audience admit and even espouse the legitimacy of Davidic kingship.

As I noted in the first section of this chapter, however, the theme of Jonathan's acting in a way that honors David's claim as Israel's rightful king is not carried through in the 1 Samuel tradition in a wholly consistent fashion, as Jonathan acts far more like a crown prince and king in waiting rather than David's subordinate in 1 Sam 19:1–7 and 20:1–11, 27–29, and 41–42. In 1 Sam 20:1–2, for example, he speaks with David as a king would speak with a subject. David also, in vv 8 and 41 of this same text, assumes more of a role as Jonathan's subordinate rather than his sovereign (identifying himself as Jonathan's servant and making obeisance before him). This positioning of Jonathan in a more kingly role in relation to David undermines the apologetic thrust of the narrative to some degree, and the narrative's apologetic agenda is undermined even more if one

were to recall that one of the key passages of Jonathan's voluntary submission, 1 Sam 18:4, belongs to the variant narrative strand that is scattered only intermittently through 1 Samuel 16–18 and is not a part of the primary Samuel tradition. Still greater undermining is suggested, moreover, if one were to agree with McCarter that some of the key passages of Jonathan's subservience are additions made by the Deuteronomistic redactors of the Samuel tradition and thus are secondary to the original text (1 Sam 20:11–17, 23:15–18).⁵³

Together, these various data indicate that the earliest forms of the David narrative fail to suggest to their audience as emphatically and unambiguously as they might that they should follow Jonathan's lead in submitting themselves politically to David. What I want to argue, though, is that the apologetic's point of view is powerfully recovered and even more forcefully put forward in the texts that focus primarily on the "personal affection" dimension of Jonathan's devotion to David. I want to argue, in other words, that while the "political loyalty" passages convey the narrative's apologetic thrust imperfectly—at some points quite bluntly, yet at others less than definitively—the verses and passages that depend primarily on "personal affection" language and imagery, although somewhat more subtle, are ultimately more successful in getting the narrative's apologetic point clearly across.

Let me point out first in this regard that, no matter how ambivalent at times the portrayal of David's and Jonathan's political relationship—David at some points acknowledged as Jonathan's political superior and at other points depicted as Jonathan's political subordinate—the Samuel tradition is unremitting in its sense that David is personally dear and beloved to Jonathan. Indeed, the theme of Jonathan's affections for David runs as a constant thread through the four texts that depict the two heroes' interactions, and it is also attested in the lament David sings upon Jonathan's death. By stressing this theme consistently, the narrative works, I believe, to clarify its varying pictures of David's and Jonathan's political relationship. Whatever the ambiguities of the political interactions, the consistent way in which Jonathan is depicted as caring for David indicates to the narrative's audience both 1. that Jonathan does not feel he has been wronged or treated badly by David during David's ascent to the throne, and thus David cannot be accused of malevolently usurping the Israelite crown from Jonathan, the rightful heir, and 2. that, as Jonathan unreservedly bestows his affections on David, so are the subjects of the Davidic monarchy to extend toward David and his dynasty their highest esteem and regard. Because Jonathan, in short, "loves" and "delights in" David unconditionally and wants only to see him live safely and prosper, then so should Samuel's ancient Israelite audience "love" and "delight in" their Davidic monarch and his dynasty, rather than feel aggrieved on

Jonathan's behalf and maintain that Jonathan has been unjustly pushed aside for the sake of David's kingship. In fact, for the narrative tradition, it is in the making of this point that the dual connotation of *love* in the David and Jonathan stories takes on special significance, so that even though, at times, Jonathan might be portrayed as acting more the political superior of David than as his political subordinate, it is nevertheless clear to the narrative's audience that his *love*—which is to say his personal affection but also his covenant fidelity and loyalty—is unwavering. Hence, the audience is told, their *love* for David, and their acknowledgement that he is their rightful king, should be unwavering as well.

But far more important in getting this message across, I believe, is the way in which David's and Jonathan's love is depicted in the Samuel narratives in homoeroticized terms, in particular homoeroticized terms that depict David and Jonathan as being like husband and wife, with Jonathan occupying the wifelike role. As I discussed at the end of [chapter 7](#) and again in the preceding section, it is these feminized depictions of Jonathan that, more than anything, have been an impediment to those who seek to explain the homoeroticized language and imagery of the David-Jonathan materials, since everywhere else in biblical tradition, it is regarded as a grievous evil to render a man feminine within a sexualized relationship. Yet in the Samuel materials, seemingly anomalously, this feminization of Jonathan within a homoeroticized context is treated as acceptable and even, to quote again from David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, a "wonderful" thing (2 Sam 1:26). But what I think McCarter's understanding of the David story as apologetic allows us to understand is that, from the narrative's point of view, homoeroticized feminization in this particular case *is* in fact something wonderful because this feminization furthers the tradition's goal of affirming David's right to the throne over the claims that might otherwise be advanced on behalf of Saul's descendants.

More specifically: by depicting Jonathan as occupying a feminized position within his homoeroticized relationship with David, and by drawing on the ancient Israelite understanding that the feminized position within sexual relationships was a position of status inferiority, the narrative is able to suggest that Jonathan has relinquished the status-superior position that he was otherwise accorded on account of his birth and inhabits instead the subordinate position women held with respect to men within the ancient Israelite sexual and social hierarchy. Sexual roles in ancient Israel, that is to say, were isomorphic with social rank,⁵⁴ or, as we who experienced the women's liberation movement of the 1970s might more succinctly say, the personal, for the ancient Israelites, was also the political. As Ken Stone writes,

“Within a culture marked by rigid gender differentiation and hierarchy, a man who assumes the [sexual] role allotted by convention to a woman is moving, socially, *downward*.”⁵⁵ The Samuel tradition, guided by this conviction, depicts Jonathan as assuming a feminine role within an eroticized and sexualized relationship with David in order to intimate that Jonathan has moved into a socially subordinate position with respect to David and so has surrendered whatever claim he might have to the throne. Any sense that the royal office David and his dynasty hold should more rightfully belong to Saul’s descendants is thereby abrogated, and the Samuel tradition forcefully reiterates its primary theme: that David can claim the kingship over Israel and Judah rightfully and without question, without question even on the part of Saul’s legitimate heir.

To put the matter another way: the ancient Israelites, as we have seen, without exception saw male-male sexual interactions as involving an active partner, gendered as male, and a passive partner, gendered as female. Furthermore, they without exception believed that to place a man in the passive or feminized position was grossly to humiliate him because that man was stripped of his male identity and with it the status superiority that comes with masculinity. Such humiliation and status subordination is normally, within a society that zealously protects the rights of its male citizens, to be decried. But, for the apologetic narrators of the Samuel narratives, Jonathan’s status subordination in relationship to David is precisely the point they want to advocate; to place Jonathan in a position of status subordination in the stories of his interactions with David is a means of achieving precisely the status elevation of David in relation to Jonathan the narrators of 1 Samuel wish to promote. We should recall, moreover, as I noted above, that while the political loyalty passages within the David and Jonathan narratives do at several points indicate that Jonathan voluntarily put aside whatever claims he might have to the throne in favor of the claims of David, they do not necessarily do so consistently. Consequently, they leave unresolved the issue of Jonathan’s political status in relationship to David. The personal affection passages we have just been considering, however, and especially the homoeroticized innuendo within these passages, by constantly depicting Jonathan as wifelike in his interactions with David, unconditionally assert that Jonathan has surrendered his status-superior position to David and so unreservedly affirm the narrative’s conviction that it is David who should be king instead of Saul’s son. We can quote again Stone regarding the ancient Israelite understanding of sexual interactions: “sexual penetration implies social submission.”⁵⁶ The Samuel narratives use this principle in insinuating a homoeroticized relationship between David and Jonathan in order to

imply social submission on Jonathan's part and social superiority on the part of David.⁵⁷

We might furthermore suggest that the narrators of the Samuel tradition intend to insinuate not only that David rules as Israel's legitimate king because the otherwise rightful heir to the throne is subordinated, like a woman, in relation to David, but that as Jonathan becomes womanlike in his relationship with David, he actually is *disqualified* from any claim to the crown he might put forward. The issue of kingly qualifications is, after all, an important theme within the Samuel tradition. Thus Saul, according to the logic of the narrative's apologetic, becomes no longer qualified to serve as Israel's king once "the spirit of Yahweh" departs from him in 1 Sam 16:14 and an evil spirit inflicts madness upon him instead. Saul, that is, comes to lack the attribute of divine affirmation that had previously entitled him to rule over Israel.⁵⁸ Jonathan's son Merib-baal/Mephibosheth is likewise depicted in the Samuel narratives as unqualified to hold the throne because he is lame and so lacking the attributes of physical prowess and might that a king requires.⁵⁹ Jonathan, the narrative may be hinting, somewhat similarly is disqualified from any claim to the throne because he has relinquished the status-superior male identity that is proper and indeed requisite for an Israelite monarch. In assuming a feminine role, that is, Jonathan may make himself suitable, according to ancient Israelite tradition, *only* to occupy a position of subservience to another.

To be sure, Israel (or, more specifically, Israel's Southern Kingdom of Judah) was, at one point in its history, ruled by a queen (2 Kgs 11:1–20), which might suggest that my reading here is wrong and a feminized identity need not disqualify Jonathan from a right to the crown. But I would counter by suggesting, first, that according to the biblical tradition, the reign of Queen Athaliah was hardly considered a success within Israel's monarchical history, which implies there existed little support among the ancient Israelites for a woman (or womanlike) ruler. Note in this regard that neither the Deuteronomistic authors of 2 Kings 11 nor the authors of the parallel account in 2 Chr 22:10–23:21 uses the standard regnal formula in describing Athaliah's reign ("so-and-so was so many years old when he began to reign; he reigned so many years"), which indicates that they did not consider Athaliah's rule to be legitimate. Second, and more important, I would argue that according to the sexual paradigms of the ancient Israelite world, Jonathan, in assuming a feminized position in relation to David, assumes a status that is even lower in some senses than that of any woman who might sit upon Israel's throne. In both Genesis 19 and Judges 19, recall, it was deemed better for the host character in each story to send forth women, even virgin daughters, to be raped than to

send forth his male guest or guests; this was because to rape women, even virgins, although a crime, was not as heinous a crime as was the proposed violation of the active role within sexual intercourse deemed proper for men. Jonathan, according to this logic, is more shamed and humiliated on account of his feminization with respect to David than would be a woman, even more shamed and humiliated than would be a woman who is sexually violated, and thus Jonathan is rendered even more subordinate than any woman. Jonathan, in short, is fallen so low, the narrative's homoeroticized innuendo may imply, and has assumed so abjectly subservient a position in relation to David, that neither he nor his descendants can ever rise again to advance a claim to the throne.

We should moreover be cognizant, in terms of this reading, of the pains to which the text goes to absolve David of any charge of sexual coercion that might be leveled against him. David, unlike, say, the inhabitants of Sodom in Genesis 19 or the Benjaminites of Gibeah in Judges 19, cannot be accused of interacting, or seeking to interact, sexually with Jonathan against Jonathan's will. Rather, the text, whether the primary or variant tradition, goes to great pains to portray Jonathan as the initiator of the two heroes' homoeroticized relationship. Thus it was Jonathan who first loved David, according to the variant tradition in 1 Sam 18:1, and likewise Jonathan who first delighted in David, according to the primary narrative strand in 1 Sam 19:1. In other words, Jonathan, although womanlike in terms of his relationship with David, acts as the sexual aggressor. This is virtually unparalleled in biblical literature, in which, much more typically, the role of sexual aggressor belongs to the masculinized partner in erotic and sexual relationships. David Damrosch points out, for example, that when the verb *hāpēs*, "to delight in," is used in an eroticized and sexualized context elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible its subject is always a man and its object is always a woman (Shechem is said to delight in Dinah, for example, in Gen 34:19).⁶⁰ We can similarly observe that, when the verb *'āhēb*, "to love," and the related noun *'ahābā*, "love," are used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to describe erotic and sexual attraction, these terms almost without exception refer to a man's feelings for a woman.⁶¹ The patriarch Isaac is said to have loved his wife Rebekah (Gen 24:67), for example, and Isaac's son Jacob to have loved his wife Rachel (Gen 29:18, 20, 30) and possibly, albeit to a lesser degree, to have loved Rachel's sister Leah as well (Gen 29:30).⁶² The mighty Samson is said to have loved Delilah (Judg 16:4, 15), and Samson's Timnite wife seems to presume that he loved her too at some point (Judg 14:16). Also, Elqanah of Ramathaim is said to have loved his wife Hannah (1 Sam 1:5), King Solomon to have loved his many foreign wives (1 Kgs 11:1, 2), King Rehoboam to have loved

his queen Ma'acah (2 Chr 11:21), and King Ahasuerus of Persia to have loved the Jewess Esther (Esth 2:17). None of these women, however, is ever described as loving her sexual partner in return, nor are women generally described in the Bible as loving the men with whom they are in an erotic or sexual relationship. Why, then, the atypical descriptions in 1 Sam 18:1, 3, 19:1, and 20:17 of the womanlike Jonathan “loving” (*’āhēb/’ahābā*) and “delighting” in (*hāpēs*) the masculinized David? I propose that within the Samuel tradition, this motif fulfills two critical functions.

First, by suggesting that Jonathan willingly and voluntarily entered into a homoeroticized relationship with David, and, more important, that Jonathan willingly and voluntarily assumed the womanlike role in his interactions with David, the Samuel narratives confirm the message found in at least some of the “political loyalty” passages I discussed above (1 Sam 18:4, 20:13–15, 23:17), the sense that Jonathan willingly and voluntarily gave his fealty to David and willingly and voluntarily accepted a position as David’s subordinate and second-in-command. Second and more crucially, the Samuel narratives, by portraying Jonathan as willingly entering into a relationship with David and even initiating their homoeroticized interactions, is able to have its cake and eat it too, so to speak, in terms of the ancient Israelite understanding of sexual and social hierarchy. By rendering Jonathan as womanlike, and thus as subordinate in status to David, the text furthers its claims that David is rightfully Israel’s king. Yet, at the same time, the text, by atypically depicting the womanlike member of its homoeroticized relationship as the relationship’s initiator, defends David against the charge that he forcibly feminized another man, an act for which, under the terms of passages such as Gen 19:1–11, Lev 18:22, 20:13, and Judg 19:22–26, he might otherwise be condemned. Indeed, this effort to exonerate David from any charges of improper coercion might explain why, as I described in [chapter 7](#), the Samuel tradition is so muted in its descriptions of David’s feelings for Jonathan, suggesting only in 1 Sam 20:41–42, 23:18, and 2 Sam 1:26 that David reciprocated Jonathan’s feelings for him and, even in these passages, barely elaborating on that point.⁶³

The motif of Jonathan as the initiator of his relationship with David, in short, serves the narrative’s apologetic agenda in multiple ways. It suggests that, as Jonathan willingly and voluntarily submitted himself sexually to David, so should the narrative’s audience willingly submit themselves politically to David and accept him as their king. At the same time, it defends David against those who might condemn him for unlawfully coercing another man.



For many modern commentators the homoeroticized innuendo of the David and Jonathan stories has generated questions about whether these two characters, to use our contemporary parlance, are or are not gay. For those, moreover, whose answer to this question is “they are” (my greeting card, for example), the stories’ homoeroticized language and imagery have served as important affirmations for the sanctity of gay men’s relationships within today’s biblically based communities of faith as well as within our larger society. But according to the reading I offer here, the authors of the Samuel narratives intended something different when they incorporated homoeroticized motifs into their accounts of David’s and Jonathan’s interactions. They intended to evoke in their audiences’ minds the very specific paradigms according to which sexual interactions were conceived of in the ancient Israelite worldview, so that their audience would immediately identify, as was the norm in the ancient Israelite conception of sexual relations, one partner in the relationship as status superior and gendered as male and the other partner in the relationship as status inferior and gendered as female. They further intended, through their indications that it was Jonathan who held the position of the womanlike status inferior, to demonstrate to their audience that David rightfully occupied the status-superior position of king over Israel and Judah that Jonathan might otherwise have claimed. They may, in fact, have intended to demonstrate to their audience that Jonathan, by assuming the status humiliation associated with feminization, became *disqualified* from any claims that might be made to the throne on his behalf or even on behalf of his descendants. Yet, at the same time, by stressing Jonathan’s “love” for and “delight in” David and by therefore depicting Jonathan as the initiator of the homoeroticized interactions, the Samuel narrators defended David against the charge that he improperly forced Jonathan’s humiliation upon him.

Samuel’s portrayal of David’s and Jonathan’s relationship, in sum, cannot serve as a model of what male-male erotic and sexual relationships can be like in our society. The stories of David’s and Jonathan’s interactions instead need to be understood as carefully shaped to fit the apologetic agenda of the Samuel accounts, and it is only within the context of the Samuel apologetic that they can be properly analyzed. Every connotation associated with male-male sexual interactions in the ancient Israelite world is evoked by the Samuel tradition and then exploited in order to convey the narrative’s conviction that David and his heirs legitimately hold the throne that might otherwise belong to the house of Saul.

I have been at some pains in my discussion of David's and Jonathan's relationship to show how closely certain aspects of David's interactions with Jonathan as recounted in 1 Samuel parallel parts of the narrative that describe David's interactions with Michal. I have noted, for example, that both Jonathan and Michal enter into contractual relationships with David (a covenant in Jonathan's case and marriage in the case of Michal) and that both subsequently abet David's attempts to escape from Saul's threats of murder by twice lying to their father, even as he condemns them for deceitfulness and disloyalty (1 Sam 19:14, 17, 20:28–34). The narrative's point in stressing these parallels, I have argued, is to portray Jonathan as Michal-like, which is to say womanlike and even wifelike, in his relationship with David and consequently to suggest that Jonathan has surrendered the position of status superiority with respect to David he otherwise could claim by virtue of his royal birth. Jonathan thereby surrenders his claim to the throne in favor of David's. In this regard Jonathan is portrayed not only as wifelike in his relationship with David but, from the Bible's point of view, as a stereotypically good wife, one who, as any stereotypically good wife should do, makes himself subordinate to the husbandlike David. Michal, as we have seen, is also cast in the role of a stereotypically good wife in 1 Samuel 18–19, subordinating herself to David and always acting in favor of his best interests, even when those interests may run counter to her own, as in 1 Sam 19:11–17, when, to quote J. Cheryl Exum (as in [chapter 7](#)), “in saving David from Saul, Michal loses him.”⁶⁴

In the final episode in which Michal appears in the David story, however, she is depicted differently. In this text, 2 Sam 6:16–23, Michal speaks with disgust about David's dancing before the ark of Yahweh as he brings it in procession into his newly established capital city of Jerusalem. This dance is apparently so enthusiastic that David's clothes fall away and expose his genitals (2 Sam 6:20). But, as Exum writes, “it doesn't take a psychologist to recognize that Michal's complaint about David's attire, or lack of it, is not the real issue.”⁶⁵ She goes on to note that Michal, in confronting David, refers to him as “the king of Israel,” and he responds also by talking of kingship—of how he has been chosen by Yahweh in place of Saul and Saul's descendants.⁶⁶ The real issue, then, is the rivalry between the house of Saul and the house of David, and Michal here—despite being David's wife—speaks in accord with her ties to her father. Indeed, as Exum perceptively points out, Michal is pointedly described twice in this passage as “Saul's daughter” (2 Sam 6:16, 20), whereas in passages where she is more allied with David, she is referred to as David's wife (1 Sam 19:11).⁶⁷

Second Sam 6:16–23 thus has the effect of portraying the previously

good wife Michal as one who has not subordinated herself to her husband but who instead acts in ways that are to her own advantage, whatever David's best interests might be. The narrative tradition responds by turning its back on her, dismissing her from the text in 2 Sam 6:23, never to appear again, and with the notice, moreover, that she was barren until the day of her death.⁶⁸ Since bearing children for ancient Israelite women was *the* primary means by which they achieved recognition within their communities,⁶⁹ the childless fate the narrative imposes on Michal here is significant indeed; as Exum puts it, "refusal to submit leads to rebuke and humiliation."⁷⁰ More important for our purposes, however, is that the narrative here asserts one last time a motif I have suggested it has earlier promoted at several points in the stories of David, Jonathan, and Michal: that Jonathan is not only, like Michal, portrayed as womanlike or wifelike in relation to David but that Jonathan's relationship with David comes to supplant or supersede David's relationship with Michal. Thus unlike Jonathan, who voluntarily surrenders his birthright to David in the Samuel tradition and is deemed praiseworthy for it, Michal, by ultimately refusing to subjugate herself or her family's dynastic claims, is condemned within the tradition as one undeserving of progeny and even as undeserving of another mention.

We can understand the narrative's point here even more clearly by considering its account of another of David's wives, Abigail. This woman is in certain respects similar to both the wifelike Jonathan and David's first wife, Michal: when she first appears in the Samuel narratives, for example, she is represented as occupying a status-superior position with respect to David comparable to the status-superior position the royal offspring Jonathan and Michal hold with respect to David when he joins Saul's court. We are thus told, in the opening verses of the scene in which Abigail is introduced (1 Sam 25:2–42), that she is married to a man named Nabal, a wealthy pastoralist who belongs to the clan of the Calebites.⁷¹ This clan, according to biblical tradition, was an especially powerful Judahite family (it traced its ancestry back to Caleb, one of the major heroes of the Joshua stories of Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan; see Num 14:20–24, 32:11–12, Deut 1:34–36, Josh 14:13–14). Jon D. Levenson has in addition persuasively argued that Nabal was not just a member of this powerful Calebite clan but its chieftain;⁷² Abigail therefore, as Nabal's wife, could legitimately claim the position of extremely high status that would come from being such a noble's wife. David, conversely, is living as a fugitive and an outcast at this point in the narrative, and the only marker of status ascribed to him is that he is the captain (*šar*) of a band of ruffians.

According to 1 Sam 25:2–42, David's ruffian band is running what is

essentially a protection racket, with David telling Nabal that he and his men did not allow any harm to come to Nabal's shearers while these shearers tended Nabal's herds in the region of Carmel and in return requesting (in effect, demanding) that Nabal give his entourage food for a feast.⁷³ Nabal refuses to pay David off, foolishly, given that David determines to avenge himself upon the Calebite. Abigail, however, seeks to make amends and so save Nabal from David's wrath. Thus, as I noted in the first section of this chapter, she loads up donkeys with abundant provisions (bread, wine, meat, grain, raisins, and fig cakes) and goes forth from Nabal's compound to bring this bounty to David (1 Sam 25:18–22). What is striking for our purposes here is the fact that, when these two actually meet, the nobleman's wife Abigail, although she surely outranks the extortionist David, acts in ways that are utterly deferential. Some of this, of course, may be the result of diplomatic tact, as Abigail's goal in engaging David is to mollify him and defuse his anger. Still, as Adele Berlin writes, "Abigail is polite far beyond what is required." Abigail, Berlin goes on to say, "acts toward David and addresses him as though he is the lord."⁷⁴ She makes obeisance before David, for example, when she comes into his presence (1 Sam 25:23), and thrice during the two verses that describe her first words to David she calls herself his "servant." She takes upon herself, moreover, the blame for Nabal's foolish act and begs David's forgiveness (1 Sam 25:24–25).

As Levenson particularly points out, Abigail acts here as the proverbial "capable" or "stalwart" woman who is lauded elsewhere in biblical tradition (the *'ēšet ḥayil* of Prov 31:10–31). For example, Abigail, even though she completely subordinates herself before David, nevertheless "opens her mouth to speak with wisdom" (Prov 31:26) so as to advise David *not* to go ahead with his planned attack upon Nabal, lest he incur bloodguilt and be subject to acts of revenge perpetrated by Nabal's family (1 Sam 25:26–31).⁷⁵ Abigail in addition appears in this scene as Proverbs's ideal wife to Nabal by "protecting her husband's interests, taking the initiative when he is unwilling or unable to act, and apologizing for his rude behavior."⁷⁶ Indeed, as I have just noted, she generously takes upon herself the blame for Nabal's foolishness, even though she in no way is actually accountable.

McCarter furthermore suggests that Abigail's pleas to David asking for mercy for Nabal and his family are reminiscent of the request for fidelity to his descendants that Jonathan makes of David in 1 Sam 20:14–16. McCarter then explains by arguing that both 1 Sam 20:14–16 and 25:28–31 were added by a later editor who was looking forward to David's actual reign and especially to 2 Samuel 7, in which Yahweh affirms David as God's chosen and bestows an eternal grant of

kingship upon David's house.⁷⁷ In terms of the analysis we are pursuing here, however, what we need to realize is the degree to which the comparison McCarter has suggested highlights how the status-surrendering Abigail is, like the status-surrendering Jonathan, a good wife (or wifelike character), as opposed to the bad wife I have discussed above, Michal. Abigail, moreover, is not just a good wife to Nabal but also, like Jonathan, a good wife to David, for, as the story of Nabal's interactions with David comes to its end, Nabal rather conveniently dies (1 Sam 25:38) and David shortly thereafter marries Abigail himself. As this marriage begins, Abigail's deferential behavior continues unabated, although David is still not in any position to deserve such consideration. In fact, Berlin again describes Abigail's homage "when David proposes marriage" as "all out of proportion," as "the widow of the wealthy rancher answers the young upstart by saying: 'Behold, your handmaid is a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord!'" (1 Sam 25:41).⁷⁸ But however out of proportion Abigail's subservience may seem from our vantage point, from the narrative's point of view, Abigail, like Jonathan, deserves to be lauded, for even though she is otherwise entitled, she voluntarily, repeatedly, and unconditionally accepts a status as the inferior of David. Thus as a character she acts in support of the narrative's attempts to show David as the legitimate occupant of the highest office in the Israelite confederacy. Whatever Michal would deny David in 2 Sam 6:16–23, Abigail, like Jonathan, works to affirm.

EPILOGUE



There is one last point I would make about Abigail as she is described in 1 Sam 25:2–42, and that is how like she is to Ishtar as described in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet VI. Yet she is unlike as well. Abigail and Ishtar are like, most obviously, in the way that they both appear within narratives that are focused on marriage to their story's hero, Ishtar proposing to Gilgamesh that the two of them wed in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet VI, lines 6–9, and Abigail and David actually marrying in 1 Sam 25:42. But the Ishtar and Abigail episodes within the Gilgamesh Epic and the David story are very unlike in that Gilgamesh scathingly repudiates Ishtar's offer of marriage, whereas David seems to waste no time in wooing and winning Abigail after her husband Nabal has died.

These similarities and differences suggest to me in microcosmic form the larger point I have promoted in the last two chapters of this book: generally both how like and unlike the Epic of Gilgamesh and the David story are. As we have seen, the David story conforms in many ways to the same rites-of-passage pattern that was so helpful in illuminating the narrative framework of the Epic of Gilgamesh. One example of this conformity is the fact that the Ishtar and the Abigail episodes occupy virtually the same structural position within the larger Gilgamesh and David tales. Both episodes occur midstream within their tales, so to speak, long after the main action of the narrative has begun, yet long before there is narrative resolution. By the time the Ishtar and Abigail episodes take place, that is, the hero is wholly engaged in the journey that will lead to the position he will occupy at the culmination of each story, yet the heroic figure, whether Gilgamesh or David, has a long way to go before he comes to his throne as a fully mature and fully capable king. According to the terms of our rites-of-passage analysis, both the Ishtar and Abigail episodes are thus positioned squarely in the midst of their story's liminal phases, as, in each, the narrative's hero stands poised betwixt and between the identity that characterized him at the beginning of his story (whether that be irresponsible monarch in the case of Gilgamesh or youthful shepherd in the case of David) and the mantle of responsible kingship he will assume at its end.

Still, while the Abigail episode occupies basically the same structural

position in 1 Samuel as does the Ishtar episode in the Epic of Gilgamesh, it does not ultimately function in the same way within the 1 Samuel narrative as does the Ishtar episode within the Gilgamesh Epic. The Ishtar episode, I argued in [chapter 5](#), does much to exemplify the liminal nature of the narrative phase of the Epic of Gilgamesh in which it is set, by stressing the liminal nature of Ishtar herself and, even more so, by stressing the liminal aspects of Ishtar's encounter with Gilgamesh: the unconventional way in which she, although female, makes a proposal of marriage, the unconventional way in which he insults her when rejecting her offer, as if she were his subordinate rather than a goddess, and the unconventional nature of her marital proposition, which, as Tzvi Abusch argues, may not be the offer to participate in the rite of the life-affirming sacred marriage it appears to be but rather an offer to Gilgamesh to descend to the netherworld and be king of the dead.¹ Gilgamesh, moreover, in rejecting Ishtar's proposal, appears liminal in that he embraces the attitude of sexual continence Victor Turner has identified as characteristic of liminality (this in contrast to his behaviors earlier, in the preliminal phase of the Epic). As I noted in [chapter 8](#), however, David, in marrying Abigail, clearly does not adopt the typically liminal stance of sexual continence. David also, as I further suggested in [chapter 8](#), often does not seem to manifest the typically liminal attitude of nonsagacity or foolishness during the story of his ascent to the throne that is told in 1 Samuel, and this is particularly true in the Abigail episode. There David's moving to woo and win Abigail almost immediately after her husband Nabal has died seems a shrewd and calculating attempt to secure certain advantages that marriage to this noblewoman might bring, especially a shrewd and calculating attempt to become a member, through this marriage, of Judah's powerful Calebite clan and thus to become the successor, in certain regards, to its chieftain Nabal. This leadership position is of obvious benefit to David as he advances his claim to the Judahite and ultimately Israelite throne.

Whereas gender roles in the Gilgamesh and Ishtar story, moreover, are confused in ways that are typical of liminality, conventional gender roles in the David and Abigail story are scrupulously observed. Indeed, if anything, I suggested in [chapter 8](#), adherence to conventional gender roles is exaggerated in the David and Abigail story, especially in the case of Abigail, who, through her completely deferential and submissive behavior, is portrayed as the utterly perfect woman and wife. This is a key, I also suggested in [chapter 8](#), to understanding how the David narrative's apologetic interests ultimately supersede its use of liminal imagery. Abigail, as a perfectly submissive and subordinate wife, models, from the apologetic's point of view, the behavior all of

David's subjects should properly assume, not challenging David or his right to rule but submitting themselves to David as Israel's rightful king. Liminal imagery, that is, although certainly present in the David story, is ultimately trumped by the story's apologetic thrust, and consequently the 1 Samuel episode involving Abigail, which we might otherwise have expected to resemble the Gilgamesh episode that involves the liminal Ishtar, is conceptualized quite differently in order to promote what is ultimately the David story's quite different agenda. Thus, the Ishtar and Abigail narratives, although in many respects similar, are handled very differently within their respective traditions because, in the end, these two episodes function in different ways according to the different priorities their two narratives seek to articulate.

Michal, too, occupies a position structurally in the David narratives that in many ways seems reminiscent of the position occupied by certain women in Gilgamesh. For example, as the prostitute Shamhat is a dominant presence in the scene in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet I, in which Enkidu begins to be separated from his previous animal-like existence, so too is Michal a dominant presence in the scenes in 1 Samuel 16–18 in which David is first separated from his early life as a shepherd. Likewise, as the alewife Siduri and somewhat the wife of Utnapishtim are dominant presences in the concluding tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh, as Gilgamesh begins to come to the realizations about the nature of existence that are necessary for him to resume his rule over Urukite society, so too is Michal a dominant presence in the scene in 2 Samuel 6 that comes at the culmination of the story of David's ascent to the combined Judahite and Israelite throne. Yet Shamhat, Siduri, and probably also Utnapishtim's wife, I argued in [chapter 5](#), are dominant presences in the scenes in the Epic of Gilgamesh in which they appear because their exceptionally liminal natures allow them to serve as figures who can effectively move the Epic's main characters, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, in and out of liminal time and space. Michal, however, although she is a dominant presence at basically the same structural points within the David tale as are Shamhat, Siduri, and Utnapishtim's wife within the Epic of Gilgamesh, hardly functions as they do as a liminal character who can help facilitate movement in and out of liminal time and space. Instead, in 1 Samuel 16–18, David is separated, to use the language of the rites-of-passage paradigm, from his previous existence as a shepherd *before* he encounters Michal in 1 Sam 18:20; similarly, in 2 Samuel, David becomes king of Judah (in 2 Samuel 2) and Israel (in 2 Samuel 5), and thus arguably completes his rite-of-passage status transition, *before* the 2 Samuel 6 episode involving Michal occurs. Michal, moreover, can hardly be described as having the same sort of liminal qualities as Shamhat, Siduri, or Utnapishtim's wife. In particular, she,

as a king's daughter, hardly exemplifies the sort of statusless existence characteristic of liminality.

Thus, although the Michal passages, like the Abigail episode, occupy basically the same structural positions as do crucial passages involving women characters in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the function of the Michal passages within the David story is ultimately quite different than are the functions of the Shamhat, Siduri, and Utnapishtim's wife passages within the Gilgamesh Epic. Shamhat, Siduri, and Utnapishtim's wife are liminal characters the Gilgamesh tradition uses as part and parcel of its overall rites-of-passage structure. The David story, however, although rites-of-passage elements are surely present, ultimately gives priority to its apologetic aims, and its portrayals of Michal, as I suggested in [chapter 8](#), need to be read in the light of these apologetic goals.

While the narrators of the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical story of David thus draw on some similar motifs regarding women and employ some similar descriptions of women's interactions with their stories' heroic characters, these narrators in the end use these similar motifs and story lines differently. Likewise, I have suggested, the Epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical story of David use some similar conceptions of sexual relationships and their hierarchalized nature, and some similar evocations of homoeroticized innuendo, ultimately in service of different agendas: the Gilgamesh Epic's homoerotic egalitarianism, however inappropriate given the paradigms of sexual hierarchy found elsewhere within Mesopotamian tradition, works in support of the text's use of a rite-of-passage pattern and, indeed, serves dramatically to illustrate crucial aspects of the Epic's liminal core; the David story's "wondrous" appreciation of Jonathan's sexual self-humiliation, however negatively this sort of surrender of status is regarded elsewhere in biblical tradition, works in support of the Samuel narrative's apologetic argument that Saul's rightful heir has abdicated whatever claim he and his descendants might make to the Israelite throne.

I suggested in the prologue that my priorities in this volume were to understand the two narratives on which I have focused in terms of their ideologies of sexual relationships, in terms of their ideologies of gender, and in terms of their narrative frameworks and structure. I hope, as I close, that I have shown how fruitful this multidimensional analysis can be, both in terms of demonstrating the Gilgamesh Epic's and the David story's points of similarity and also in terms of illustrating features that are distinctive to each of these two magnificent tales of ancient Near Eastern heroic love.

Notes

Prologue

1. On the dates of the earliest forms of the Gilgamesh and David stories that have come down to us, see my discussions in chapter 2 with regard to the Gilgamesh traditions and in chapter 6 with regard to the David materials.

2. See, for example, Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, pp. 75–87.

3. As in n. 1 above, see, on the dates of the final and most elaborate versions of the Gilgamesh and David stories, my discussions in chapter 2 with regard to the Gilgamesh traditions and in chapter 6 with regard to the David materials.

4. The description of Gilgamesh as the “greatest among kings” is found in Tablet I, line 27, of the Standard or Late version of the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh (the version standardized by the mid first millennium BCE). The line number here is taken, as are line numbers from the Standard or Late version cited elsewhere in this volume, from Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The translation is my own, as are the translations of ancient Near Eastern texts found throughout unless otherwise noted. As is conventional in Assyriological scholarship, brackets in the translations of some of the Mesopotamian materials mark gaps in (and, in some cases, proposed restorations to) the original text; parentheses in these translations typically mark annotations I (or in some cases, other translators) have added. Brackets and parentheses are also used in this way in my occasional translations of Canaanite texts. In translations of biblical materials, however, brackets typically mark my (or others’) annotations.

5. For the biblical descriptions of David killing tens of thousands of ancient Israel’s enemies as opposed to King Saul’s thousands, see 1 Sam 18:7, 21:11, 29:5; for the descriptions of David’s prowess against Aramaean troops, see 2 Sam 8:3–5; for the story of David’s defeat of the Philistine champion Goliath, see 1 Sam 17:1–58.

6. Jackson, *The Hero and the King*; this reference brought to my attention by Neal Walls, personal communication.

7. Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet X, lines 60, 134, 233.

8. 2 Sam 1:26. On textual issues concerning this passage, see chapter 7.

9. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 76.

10. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*.

1. Of Greeting Cards and Methods

1. The card was produced by Robert Lentz and published in 1995 by Bay Area Dignity. “Dignity,” in the words of the Roman Catholic priest Daniel J. Helminiak, who has worked with several of its chapters, “is a support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual Catholics and their friends”; see Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, p. 11.

2. The card does not identify the source of this quotation, but it is taken from the Jerusalem Bible translation of 2 Sam 1:26.

3. The fight for same-sex civil unions in Vermont first emerged in the public arena in 1997, when a suit arguing for same-sex couples' right to marry was heard in Vermont's Chittenden County Superior Court. That court's negative decision was subsequently appealed to the Vermont Supreme Court, which in December 1999 issued a ruling overturning the lower court's decision and requiring the Vermont legislature to create a system that provided the benefits and protections of marriage to same-sex couples. The Vermont legislature held several months of hearings in early 2000 in order to craft such a system before Vermont's then-governor, Howard Dean, signed the civil unions bill into law on April 26, 2000. It took effect on July 1 of that same year.

4. Ackerman, "When the Bible Enters the Fray."

5. Weeks, *Coming Out*, p. 2; these quotes brought to my attention by Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p. 16.

6. This definition is taken from Nissinen, *Homosexualities in the Biblical World*, p. 16.

7. Paraphrased from Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, p. 86; Bray's quote brought to my attention by Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p. 12.

8. The social constructionist bibliography is vast. In my own thinking I have been particularly guided by the following works: Butler, *Gender Trouble*; D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; D'Emilio, "Gay History: A New Field of Study" and "Making and Unmaking Minorities: The Tensions Between Gay History and Politics," in *Making Trouble*, pp. 96–113, 181–190; Dinshaw, "Introduction: Touching on the Past," in *Getting Medieval*, pp. 1–54; Halperin, "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality"; Halperin, "'Homosexuality': A Cultural Construct"; Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin, "Introduction," in *Before Sexuality*, pp. 3–20; Jagose, *Queer Theory*, pp. 7–21; Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*, pp. 1–55; Padgug, "Sexual Matters," pp. 3–23; Stein, *Uncovering Desire*; Stein, *Forms of Desire*; Weeks, *Coming Out*; Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*; Winkler, *Constraints of Desire*. Like almost all of these scholars, moreover, I owe an enormous debt to Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*.

9. As pointed out by Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 15; Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 10. Cf., however, Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 42, n. 4, who cites a reference to "homosexual instincts" in Symonds, *Problem in Modern Ethics* (privately printed in England in 1891), as the earliest use of the term *homosexual* in English.

10. The earliest use of the term *homosexual* in an American publication is also in 1892, by Kiernan, "Responsibility in Sexual Perversion," p. 198, citing Chaddock's translation of Krafft-Ebing. See Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 155, n. 1; Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*, pp. 19–21.

11. Herzer, "Ein Brief von Kertbeny," pp. 28, 33; Feray and Herzer, "Homosexual Studies and Politics," p. 29. As Herzer points out ("Kertbeny and the Nameless Love," p. 16), Kertbeny's original terminology has changed somewhat in the modern German lexicon, as in German today, Kertbeny's nouns *Homosexual* and *Heterosexual* have been replaced by *Homosexuelle* and *Heterosexuelle*.

12. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 155, n. 2; Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 53; Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor*, p. 16; and, most thoroughly, Herzer, "Kertbeny and the Nameless Love," pp. 1–26.

13. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 15.

14. "The Debut of the Heterosexual" is the title of chapter 2 in Katz's *Invention of Heterosexuality*.

15. This example evoked by Boswell, "Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," p. 96.

16. Stein, "Social Constructionist and Essentialist Theories," p. 554.

17. On the religions, versus religion, of ancient Israel, see Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, pp. 14–15.

18. A similar point is made by Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 11; see also Boswell, “Categories, Experience and Sexuality,” pp. 142–143, on the lack of a word for religion in ancient Rome, despite the fact that it seems obvious to scholars that we can speak of such a phenomenon.

19. Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 10.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

21. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 46.

22. Padgug, “Sexual Matters,” p. 14.

23. Halperin describes his own position as “close to that of the constructionists” and not necessarily as full-blown social constructionism (*One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 42). Nevertheless, his position is close enough that I feel, for my purposes here, it is reasonable to place him under the larger social constructionism rubric.

24. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 15.

25. Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality,” pp. 116, 117–122, as cited in Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, pp. 15–16.

26. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 15.

27. Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 34.

28. D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, p. 125.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 126, quoting Sweat, *Ethel’s Love-Life*, pp. 82–83.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 121; this quote brought to my attention by Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 47.

31. Data from the Greek world are central in Foucault’s analysis (see especially *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*); they are in addition crucial to the arguments of Nussbaum, “Therapeutic Arguments”; Padgug, “Sexual Matters,” pp. 3–4, 13, 16.

32. Plato, *Symposium* 189d–193d.

33. Plato, as quoted in Waetjen, “Same-Sex Sexual Relations in Antiquity,” p. 107.

34. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 20.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

37. This conceptualization of sex as an act of use in the Greco-Roman world is particularly well described by Fredrickson, “Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27,” pp. 200–205.

38. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, pp. 29–30.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

43. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p. 33.

44. Vance, “Social Construction Theory,” p. 48.

45. Katz, *Invention of Heterosexuality*, p. 8.

46. Although he considers only studies that examine Romans 1 and its attitudes toward same-sex erotic and sexual interactions, Martin, “Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32,” pp. 349–350, reaches a similar conclusion in describing how the “modern logic [of sexuality] ... rules virtually every current discussion [of Romans 1], including those by people priding themselves on being ‘true to the Bible.’”

47. The number of works written prior to 1980 that consider the Bible’s attitudes toward same-sex erotic and sexual interactions is relatively small. Most significant is Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, whose initial focus is the

Bible, although, as his book's title implies, he considers as well the nearly two thousand years of the postbiblical period. Two other "history of homosexuality" books from the 1970s also devote some space to biblical analysis: Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History*, and Vanggaard, *Phallos*. The only other major pre-1980 studies that consider the Bible of which I am aware are Atkinson, *Homosexuals in the Christian Fellowship*; Bahnsen, *Homosexuality: A Biblical View*; Horner, *Jonathan Loved David*; Jones, *Toward a Christian Understanding of the Homosexual*; and McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, especially pp. 37–66. Important articles published before 1980 include: Bartlett, "A Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality"; Furnish, "Homosexuality," in *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, pp. 52–83 (republished in a revised edition of this book in 1985, pp. 52–82); and Pope, "Homosexuality." It is also appropriate to mention here a book published the same year as Boswell's, Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality*, and to note as well three pre-1980s studies in German that are cited by Brooten in the bibliography of her *Love Between Women*, pp. 368–370: Kähler, "Exegese zweier neutestamentlicher Stellen"; Ridderbos, "Bibel und Homosexualität"; and van de Spijker, *Die gleichgeschlechtliche Zuneigung*.

48. Although the terms *social constructionist* and *essentialist* are commonly used in the debate being discussed here, Boswell himself rightly rejects the epithet *essentialist* as one not of his making, nor of the making of his intellectual allies. Rather, as he points out, the term was coined by the social constructionists and used as what even Halperin admits is "a retroactive and pejorative label" to denigrate a position the constructionists oppose (Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 168, n. 1). See Boswell, "Gay History," p. 74; Boswell, "Postscript" to "Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories," p. 35; Boswell, "Concepts, Experience, and Sexuality," pp. 67–68; Boswell, "Categories, Experience and Sexuality," pp. 133–134. Boswell himself prefers the terms *nominalists* and *realists*, nominalists being those who regard categories like homosexual and heterosexual as "arbitrary conventions, simply names for things which have categorical force because humans agree to use them in certain ways," and realists considering "categories to be the footprints of reality ('universals') [that] exist because humans perceive a real order in the universe and name it." Boswell, "Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," p. 91.

49. In *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* Boswell carefully differentiates between the terms *gay*, which he defines as "a person who prefers erotic contact with his or her own gender" (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 41), and *homosexual*. His objections to the latter term, if I read him correctly, are primarily literalistic: the most obvious literal meaning of the artificially constructed term *homosexual* (with its Greek prefix and Latin root) is, he argues, "of one sex," which, according to Boswell, may well describe a certain kind of sexual act performed by two persons of the same sex, but hardly describes the kind of person who might perform these acts and even less so the sort of person who "dreams of committing the act but never realizes the ambition" (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 41). For Boswell, then, *homosexual* can function as an adjective, and thus he can speak of a "homosexual marriage" or even elliptically of a "homosexual person," as in a person "of predominantly homosexual erotic interest" (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 44). But, because of its ambiguities, *homosexual* cannot serve as a noun that seeks to distinguish "who is and who is not" (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 43). The term *gay*, Boswell suggests by way of contrast, is more precise with regard to the "who is and who is not" question in that it describes persons "who are conscious of erotic preference for their own gender," the key qualifier here seemingly being *conscious*, which, in Boswell's words, makes "the category one which is principally self-

assigned" (*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 43).

My own sense, however, is that Boswell's insistence on conscious erotic preference potentially hamstrings his work as a historian, since the historian will more often than not have little or no access to the consciousness of his or her subjects. Yet Boswell elsewhere makes clear that it is these individual subjects whom he thinks are properly studied as part of the enterprise of "gay history": "city-states of the ancient world did not, for the most part, discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, and, as societies, appear to have been blind to the issue of sexual object choice, but it is not clear that individuals were unaware of distinctions in that matter" ("Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," p. 98). I would also argue that whatever the literalistic meaning of *homosexual* as "of one sex," the term is typically understood to have a much broader meaning, as in Nissinen's definition of homosexuals that I quoted earlier (individuals who have "most of [their] erotic needs met in interactions with persons of the same sex"; *Homeropticism in the Biblical World*, p. 16). Indeed, Boswell, according to his 1988 "Postscript" to "Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories," p. 35, seems to come to exactly this realization, writing:

I would now define 'gay persons' more simply as those whose erotic interest is predominantly directed towards their own gender (i.e., regardless of how conscious they are of this as a distinguishing characteristic). This is the sense in which, I believe, it is used by most American speakers, and ... when communicating with the public it seems to me counterproductive to use common words in senses different from or opposed to their ordinary meanings.

Yet cf. Boswell in "Jews, Bicycle Riders, and Gay People," p. 206, n. 2, which appeared in the year *after* the 1988 "Postscript" to "Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories." In this article Boswell, as in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, insists on differentiating between the terms *gay people* and *homosexual*, the latter being "applicable to acts independent of erotic inclination" and the former being applicable to all persons "sexually attracted to their own gender," even if those persons "do not engage in sexual activity."

At best, it seems that one would have to say Boswell's ideas regarding terminology remained fluid during the decade after *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* was published, which suggests, by extension, that the terms *gay* and *homosexual* themselves are used with a certain fluidity in his writings. See further the comments of Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, p. 29, who argues that, at least in Boswell's 1982–83 essay "Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," homosexuality and gayness seem to mean the same thing.

50. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 49.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 22, n. 42.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

54. See Boswell, "Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," *passim*; Boswell, "Gay History," especially pp. 74–75; Boswell, the 1988 "Postscript" to "Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories," pp. 34–36. A fundamentally essentialist position is also presumed, although not argued for, in Boswell's "Jews, Bicycle Riders, and Gay People," pp. 205–228. See as well the last work Boswell published before his untimely death, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, in which Boswell, although he backs down somewhat from his earlier essentialist language (for example, by substituting the presumably more neutral phrase *same-sex union* for, say, *gay marriage*), nevertheless "signals an unwillingness to accommodate the questions posed by theorists of social construction" (Cadden, "Review of Boswell," p. 695). Note the similarly trenchant analysis of Boswell's

fundamental essentialism, despite his own partial disclaimers, in Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, pp. 30–31.

55. This is Boswell's characterization of what he calls the realist (here essentialist) position (see further above, n. 48), in "Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," p. 92.

56. Some recent commentaries have challenged the traditional interpretation that understands Rom 1:18–32 as addressing the "failure of the Gentiles," arguing instead that Paul's topic is humanity more generally. For discussion, see Brooten, *Love Between Women*, pp. 204–206; Martin, "Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32," pp. 333–339; Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, pp. 83–125.

57. The most comprehensive discussion of the terms *natural* and *unnatural* is that of Brooten, *Love Between Women*, pp. 215–302; see as well Martin, "Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32," pp. 339–349. Note also Brooten's "Select Annotated Bibliography on Romans 1:26f and the New Testament and Homosexuality Generally," in *Love Between Women*, pp. 363–372, for a survey of various scholarly positions on Rom 1:26–27, to which should be added the following materials published subsequent to Brooten's book: Blount, "Reading and Understanding the New Testament on Homosexuality"; Fredrickson, "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27"; Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 229–303; Jewett, "The Social Context and Implications of Homoerotic References in Romans 1:24–27"; Mauser, "Creation and Human Sexuality in the New Testament"; Mauser, "Creation, Sexuality, and Homosexuality in the New Testament"; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, pp. 103–113; Schoedel, "Same-Sex Eros"; Waetjen, "Same-Sex Sexual Relations in Antiquity."

58. In *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 9, n. 9, Boswell seems to evince some sympathy for a biological or genetic etiology for homosexuality, although, in his 1988 "Postscript" to "Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories," p. 36, he insists that he was, when writing *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, "agnostic about the origins and etiology of human sexuality" and that he remains so (see similarly Boswell, "Concepts, Experience, and Sexuality," p. 69, and Boswell, "Categories, Experience and Sexuality," p. 137).

59. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, pp. 109, 112.

60. By biblical scholars I mean those who have trained professionally in Ph.D. or Th.D. programs in biblical studies and who typically use this training to attain a faculty position in a college, university, or seminary setting, where they teach courses and conduct research on the Bible and biblically related topics.

61. In addition to the exegetes listed below, see the pastoral counselor and ordained Roman Catholic priest Daniel J. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, pp. 61–83.

62. This description taken from the back cover of Glaser's book *Come Home!*

63. Glaser, *Come Home!* pp. 31–32.

64. Gomes, *The Good Book*, p. 157.

65. This description taken from the back jacket flap of McNeill's book *Freedom, Glorious Freedom*.

66. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*, p. 55.

67. McNeill, *Freedom, Glorious Freedom*, p. 130.

68. A phenomenon that Boswell himself apparently commented upon: see Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural," p. 184.

69. As is indicated by the fact that Furnish cites Richard B. Hays's important critique of Boswell, "Relations Natural and Unnatural." See Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality," p. 34, n. 14.

70. Mauser, "Creation and Human Sexuality in the New Testament." Boswell is cited in a note on p. 15 but not elsewhere discussed. This article is published also as

"Creation, Sexuality, and Homosexuality in the New Testament," but without footnotes (and so without any citation of Boswell).

71. In n. 1 on p. 37 of "Reading and Understanding the New Testament on Homosexuality," Blount cites Hays's critique of Boswell that is cited in n. 69 above.

72. Smith, "Ancient Bisexuality and the Interpretation of Romans 1:26–27," p. 225.

73. Brooten, *Love Between Women*, p. 242.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

75. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, p. 333.

76. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 286.

77. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural," p. 184.

78. Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," p. 9; Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 388.

79. Hays, "Relations Natural and Unnatural," pp. 200, 202.

80. Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality," p. 26.

81. Mauser, "Creation, Sexuality, and Homosexuality," p. 48.

82. Above, n. 70.

83. As most astutely pointed out by Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation," p. 166.

84. Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," p. 10; Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 390.

85. Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," pp. 9, 12; Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, pp. 388–389, 397–398. For a similar analysis of the inconsistencies in Hays's logic, see Martin, "Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32," p. 340 and n. 22 on that page.

86. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 37–38.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 487; this quote brought to my attention by Wink, "To Hell with Gays?" p. 32.

88. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 380–395.

89. For Gagnon's characterizations of gay men, see especially *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, pp. 30 and 471–483, and also the devastating critique of this part of Gagnon's analysis by Wink, "To Hell with Gays?" p. 33 (with a response by Gagnon, "Gays and the Bible," pp. 40–43, and a further rejoinder by Wink, "A Reply by Walter Wink," pp. 43–44). For Halperin's self-identification as gay, see, for example, the autobiographical comments found in his "'Homosexuality': A Cultural Construct."

90. Brooten, *Love Between Women*, pp. 8–9.

91. Pellegrini, "Lesbian Historiography Before the Name?" pp. 582–583.

92. Halperin, "Lesbian Historiography Before the Name?" p. 562.

93. Brooten, *Love Between Women*, pp. 1–3.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

95. Brennan, "Review of Brooten," unpaginated.

96. Stone, "Lesbian Historiography Before the Name?" p. 592.

97. Hunter, "Review of Brooten," p. 139.

98. Castelli, "Review of Brooten," p. 128.

99. Fredrickson, "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24–27," p. 199.

100. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, p. 51.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

103. *Ibid.*, pp. 94–95.

104. Martin, "Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18–32," p. 349.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 342, n. 23.

106. *Ibid.*, p. 346.

107. Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor*, pp. 134–135, 161, 163.

108. Good, "The New Testament and Homosexuality," p. 309.
109. Martin, "Arsenokoitês and Malakos," pp. 117–119.
110. Ibid., pp. 124, 128.
111. Siker, "Gentile Wheat and Homosexual Christians," pp. 140–141.
112. Waetjen, "Same-Sex Sexual Relations in Antiquity," p. 113.
113. Taylor, "The Bible and Homosexuality," p. 4.
114. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 10.
115. This description taken from Stein, "Introduction," in *Forms of Desire*, p. 6.
116. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 10.
117. Ibid., p. 8.
118. Richlin, "Not Before Homosexuality."
119. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 12.
120. Ibid., p. 8.
121. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 22.
122. Ibid., p. 23, quoting a mid-fifth-century Latin translation and adaptation of Soranos' work by the African writer Caelius Aurelianus.
123. Olyan, "And with a Male," p. 181, n. 4.
124. Ibid., p. 186, n. 17.
125. Ibid., p. 188.
126. Stone, "Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19," p. 96; see similarly Stone's discussion in his *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, pp. 75–76.
127. Stone, "Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19," p. 99; Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, p. 79.
128. Stone, "Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19," p. 100; Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, pp. 80–81.
129. Stone, "Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19," pp. 99–102; see similarly Stone's discussion in his *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, pp. 80–84.
130. Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation," pp. 148–149.
131. Ibid., p. 157.
132. Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews in 'The History of Sexuality?'" p. 354.
133. Ibid., p. 353.
134. Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation," p. 168.
135. Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews in 'The History of Sexuality?'" p. 341, n. 18. Note similarly Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor*, p. 255, n. 16.

2. Introducing Gilgamesh

1. According to William L. Moran, the Epic of Gilgamesh is "the supreme literary achievement of the ancient world before Homer" ("Ut-napishtim Revisited," p. 13); Tzvi Abusch similarly describes the Epic as having a place in Western literature "beside Homer and the Books of Judges and Samuel" ("Ishtar's Proposal," p. 143). Moran elsewhere points out that, among those who have made this sort of claim for Gilgamesh, we should particularly attend to the praise extended by Rainer Maria Rilke, who in a letter to Katharina Kippenberg calls Gilgamesh "overwhelming," "the greatest thing one can experience." As Moran suggests, the opinion of such a great poet, writing about poetry, deserves our "special attention and respect," for Rilke is among those who have stood "not only in the outer chambers of reading, theory, and criticism, but within the sacred precincts of poetry itself." See Moran, "Rilke," p. 208; also Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2327, and Moran, "Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism," p. 15 (this latter

reference brought to my attention by George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. xxxii–xxxiii).

2. For one of the most recent and easily accessible reviews of Mesopotamian history, see Charpin, “History of Ancient Mesopotamia,” pp. 807–829.

3. On the location of the Cedar Forest in the west, see below, chapter 4, n. 141.

4. Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 219; see likewise Jacobsen, “Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision,” p. 249; also Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging*, pp. 32–49; Moran, “Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism,” p. 18, and the references listed there; Moran, “Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia,” p. 2332; Vanstiphout, “Craftsmanship of *Sîn-leqi-unninnī*,” pp. 49, 65–66. Abusch speaks somewhat similarly of the Gilgamesh Epic as a story about “growth” but (correctly in my opinion) does not insist on linking this growth to the chronological point in the human life cycle at which a youngster comes of age: see Abusch’s “Development and Meaning,” p. 616; also Abusch, “Ishtar’s Proposal,” p. 144.

5. In addition to my discussion here, see the evidence proposed by Harris, *Gender and Aging*, pp. 37–43, although I would note that I am not nearly as confident as is Harris about using cross-cultural psychological markers of adolescence (for example, antisocial behavior, competitiveness, aggressiveness, recklessness, risk taking) as proof of Gilgamesh’s youthfulness.

6. As I noted in the prologue, the line numbers here and throughout that refer to the text of the Gilgamesh Epic’s Standard or Late version (the version standardized by the mid-first millennium BCE) are taken from Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

7. These lessons of the Gilgamesh Epic are nowhere more masterfully or movingly discussed than in Moran, “Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism,” pp. 20–22.

8. Somewhat similarly, Thomas van Nortwick, despite arguing that Gilgamesh is “obviously a young man,” describes his story as one that “leaves us with a ‘middle-aged’ view of the world” (*Somewhere I Have Never Travelled*, p. 37). Note also, on Gilgamesh’s age, Hillers, “Bow of Aqhat,” p. 76.

9. Lambert, “Gilgamesh in Literature and Art,” p. 41.

10. The evidence for a historical Gilgamesh has been recently and well discussed by Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. xxvii–xxix, and Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 13–16. See also Lambert, “Gilgamesh in Religious, Historical and Omen Texts,” pp. 39–56, and Sasson, “Some Literary Motifs,” pp. 259–262.

11. A convenient rendering of the parts of the Sumerian King List discussed here can be found in A. Leo Oppenheim’s translation in *ANET*, pp. 265a–266a, and all quotes are taken from this edition. For the entire text, see Jacobsen, ed., *The Sumerian King List*.

12. For the text of the late third-millennium BCE hymn written in praise of Gilgamesh, see Klein, “Šulgi and Gilgamesh,” pp. 271–292. A conveniently located translation of the epic tale of “Gilgamesh and Agga,” by Samuel Noah Kramer, can be found in *ANET*, pp. 44b–47a; for more recent translations, see Frayne, “Sumerian Gilgamesh Poems,” pp. 99–104, and George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 143–148. With regard to the “Gilgamesh and Agga” text, it is important to note that, although the tablets on which it is inscribed date only to the first half of the second millennium BCE, most scholars assume (as I do here) that the date of the original composition was in the late third millennium BCE; see below, n. 13, and also Kramer’s comments in *ANET*, p. 45a.

13. As in n. 12 above, Kramer’s easily accessible translations of “Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living” and “The Death of Gilgamesh” can be found in *ANET*, pp. 47a–50a and 50a–52a, respectively; for more recent translations, and, for translations of “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven” and “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld,” see Frayne, “Sumerian Gilgamesh Poems,” pp. 104–154, and George,

Epic of Gilgamesh, pp. 149–208. As also in n. 12, it is important to note that we actually know these Sumerian texts only from copies dating from the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1600 BCE), but scholars generally presume, as I do here, that these Old Babylonian tablets date back to the late third millennium BCE. See Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 12, and n. 40 on that page.

14. Scholarship of the earlier twentieth century argued that there was already an integrated Gilgamesh Epic during the Sumerian period; that the Sumerian compositions were instead separate tales was first demonstrated by Kramer, “Epic of Gilgameš,” pp. 7–23. Cf., however, Bing, “Sumerian Epic,” pp. 1–11.

15. There is some debate on exactly what parts of the flood tradition were incorporated into the Old Babylonian version of the Epic. Most agree that the extended flood narrative found in the later version was not present (see, for example, Moran, “Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism,” p. 20) but that some elements from the story of the flood were present. Abusch concurs, but he has also provocatively argued that in the Old Babylonian version, as opposed to the Standard version, Utnapishtim’s dwelling place was not the original goal of Gilgamesh’s journey but one that he developed only *after* he encountered the alewife Siduri at her tavern that stood on the shores of the sea across which Utnapishtim lived. See Abusch’s “Gilgamesh’s Request and Siduri’s Denial, Part I,” pp. 9–14, and his “Mourning the Death of a Friend,” pp. 55–59 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*); also Abusch, “Development and Meaning,” p. 615, n. 3, and pp. 617–618.

16. For example, “the fifty Urukites who set out with Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the Sumerian version of the journey to the Cedar Mountain [the dwelling place of Huwawa/Humbaba] are absent in the epic”; “the third-person style” of both the Sumerian and Akkadian stories of the flood “is replaced by first-person narrative, as is required by the plot of *Gilgamesh*”: Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 24–25. See also Kramer, “Epic of Gilgameš,” pp. 15–16; my discussion below in this chapter and in chapter 3 concerning the Akkadian reconceptualization of the nature of Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s relationship; and my comments in chapter 5 exploring the reasons that may have driven some of the other changes from the Sumerian to the Akkadian.

17. Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 19.

18. The parade presentation of this thesis is Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 39–54; see, less substantially, Tigay, “Was There an Integrated Gilgamesh Epic?” pp. 215–218.

19. The Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet. For the text, see Langdon, *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

20. The Old Babylonian Yale Tablet; Harmal Fragments A and B; and the Oriental Institute Fragment (also called the Ishchali Tablet, the Chicago Tablet, or the Bauer Fragment). For the text of the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, see Jastrow and Clay, *Old Babylonian Version of the Gilgamesh Epic*. For Old Babylonian Harmal Fragments A and B, see van Dijk, “Textes divers du Musée de Bagdad, II,” p. 91 (Pl. 12); van Dijk, “IM 52615: un songe d’Enkidu,” pp. 114–121; van Dijk, “Textes Divers Du Musée de Bagdad III,” pp. 9–10, and Pl. 3–4. For the Old Babylonian Oriental Institute Fragment, see Bauer, “Ein viertes altbabylonisches Fragment,” pp. 254–262.

21. The Old Babylonian Meissner and Millard Fragments; for the texts, see Meissner, *Ein altbabylonisches Fragment*, and Millard, “Gilgamesh X,” pp. 99–105. For the phrase “waters of death” cited here, see the Millard Fragment, col. iv, line 8.

22. Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 40.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47; as in n. 15 above, however, cf. Abusch regarding the question of whether or not the dwelling place of Utnapishtim was the goal of Gilgamesh’s journey when he first set off wandering in the Old Babylonian story.

24. Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 244; Tigay, “Summary: The Evolution,” pp. 43–44.

25. Moran reports that “unpublished tablets from Emar in Syria indicate that the

epic, with the probable exception of Tablet XII, had assumed more or less final form by the thirteenth century BCE" ("Gilgamesh," p. 559a); Abusch, "Development and Meaning," p. 618, seems basically to presume a similar chronology.

26. Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 12–13.

27. The translation of this line is taken from Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2331.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 2332; see similarly Moran, "Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism," pp. 17–18.

29. Restoring "mother" (*ummu*) in lines 62 and 74, as proposed in the collation of Thompson, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 11–12 (Thompson's Tablet I, col. ii, lines 16 and 27) and adopted in the recent translations of Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 5–6; Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, p. 67; and Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 5. The Gardner and Maier translation must, however, be used with caution; see Moran, "Utnapishtim Revisited," pp. 13–14. Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 71–72, suggests the restoration "husband, lover" (*hā'iru*), reflected also in the translation of George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 4.

30. See especially the discussions of Moran, "Gilgamesh," pp. 558b–559a; Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," pp. 2328–2329; and Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 202–209.

31. Although some see the Akkadian *šam-hat* as a generic noun meaning "prostitute" rather than a name (for example, Grayson, "Epic of Gilgamesh," 503; Lambert, "Prostitution," pp. 128, 139; Speiser, "Epic of Gilgamesh," p. 74, n. 23), most commentators treat it as a proper name. See Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 126, n. 14; Diakonoff, "Review of Böhl," p. 62; Foster, "Gilgamesh," p. 25; Huehnergard, *Grammar*, p. 477, n. 21; Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 20.

32. The interpretation of this passage is much debated; see further my discussion in chapter 3.

33. See further Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2332; Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 76–81; and my discussion in chapter 5.

34. This has been argued especially by Abusch; see his "Ishtar's Proposal," pp. 180–187, and his "Development and Meaning," p. 615, n. 3, and p. 618. Abusch's analysis depends on his understanding of Ishtar's proposal in Tablet VI as being, although ostensibly an offer of marriage, actually an offer to Gilgamesh to become a functionary of the netherworld. As Abusch sees it, Gilgamesh, while initially rejecting this offer of Ishtar's, eventually must accept what is his inevitable role as the netherworld's lord. But he does this only in Tablet XII of the Standard version of the Epic (on which see further below). Ishtar's proposal in Tablet VI, that is, only makes sense in Abusch's interpretation when read in conjunction with the Standard version's Tablet XII; hence the goddess's proposal, according to Abusch, could not have been part of the Old Babylonian epic tradition, of which Tablet XII was not a part.

35. But cf. again, as in nn. 15 and 23, Abusch on the goal of Gilgamesh's journey in the Old Babylonian version.

36. See Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 95–103, for a close analysis of the Tablet X speeches; for more on the phenomenon of homogenization in the Standard version, see Cooper, "Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu," pp. 39–44, and note also Cooper's "Symmetry and Repetition," pp. 508–512.

37. See Moran, "Gilgamesh," p. 559b; Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," pp. 2329–2330; and Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," p. 243.

38. This translation of the plant's name is Moran's, in "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2335.

39. Most thoroughly argued by Jacobsen in "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and

Tragic Vision," pp. 246–249; see also Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 208; Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2335; Moran, "Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism," pp. 21–22.

40. Here I break with the analysis Jacobsen offers in "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," pp. 246–249, for, while I agree with him (as in n. 39 above) that the ending of the Standard version is not meant to be unremittingly bleak, I disagree with his assessment that the Standard version's conclusion somehow presents a romantic vision as opposed to the Old Babylonian's tragic one. As Jacobsen sees it, the Standard version's Gilgamesh, once resigning himself to the inevitability of death, "rallies quickly" and reassumes the identity of the "brilliantly successful Gilgamesh" introduced in the Standard version's prologue, "first and foremost the great explorer and discoverer" (p. 248). In making this argument, Jacobsen relies particularly on his sense that there is something almost triumphant and uplifting about the tour of Uruk's walls that Gilgamesh gives Urshanabi, so that the pride Gilgamesh is said to take in these structures really does replace completely his hope for immortality; thus Gilgamesh at the Epic's end, according to Jacobsen, derives just as much satisfaction and joy from Uruk's walls as he would have derived from a grant of eternal life. As I have indicated above, I would read much more a resigned note in Gilgamesh's final speech regarding the walls, suggesting that they represent only a fraction of the sort of heroic triumph for which Gilgamesh had hoped. For a more pessimistic reading still, see Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, pp. 71–72.

41. For this translation, and on the image of the weary yet peaceful Gilgamesh, see Moran, "Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism," p. 16; also pp. 21–22. Some commentators, however, translate *pašāhu* as "resigned": see, for example, Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 50.

42. Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 27; see similarly Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 5, 105–107, 138; Kramer, "Epic of Gilgamesh," p. 23; also the comments of Bottéro, *L'Épopée de Gilgamesh*, pp. 53–55 (this reference brought to my attention by Vulpe, "Irony and Unity," p. 275); George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 100; Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 215; Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," p. 232; Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. xxi, daggered note on the bottom of the page, and pp. 116–117; Kramer, *From the Tablets of Sumer*, p. 214; Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2335; Sasson, "Some Literary Motifs," p. 267 (but cf. Sasson's "Gilgamesh Epic," p. 1027a); and Vanstiphout, "Craftsmanship of *Sîn-leqi-unninnī*," p. 46, n. 7. Cf., however, Harris, *Gender and Aging*, pp. 35, 48, and 119–128, who sees Tablet XII as "an integral part of the *Gilgamesh Epic*" (p. 48); similarly, Alster, "Paradigmatic Character," pp. 55–60; Kilmer, "Note on an Overlooked Word-Play," pp. 130–131, who argues that Tablet XII is a "dramatic capstone"; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 23, and Parpola, "Assyrian Tree of Life," pp. 193–194, both of whom regard Tablet XII as "the necessary climax of the whole story" (Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 145, n. 17); Oppenheim, "Mesopotamian Mythology II," p. 20, who suggests Tablet XII may be "the crowning stone"; and Vulpe, "Irony and Unity," passim. Gwendolyn Leick too sees a place for Tablet XII in the Epic's story, although she admits it fits "rather uneasily" (*Sex and Eroticism*, p. 267). Abusch, "Development and Meaning," pp. 618, 620–621, differentiates between a late second-millennium BCE eleven-tablet version, roughly identical to the first eleven tablets of the Standard version as we know it, and the twelve-tablet version of the mid-first millennium BCE. He then argues the twelfth tablet was added intentionally to change the focus of the Epic. Not dissimilar is the analysis of Ray, "The Gilgamesh Epic," p. 306.

43. Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, also restores *bēlu*, "master," in Tablet XII, line 31. See as well Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 121; cf. George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 192.

44. Moran, "Gilgamesh," p. 558b.

45. "Probably the most inspired literary achievement in the annals of Mesopotamian creative thinking" according to Sasson, "Some Literary Motifs," p. 265.

46. Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," p. 245. Jacobsen goes on to speak of the Sumerian Enkidu as Gilgamesh's slave, who watches "over his young master somewhat in the manner of an anxious nanny watching a child."

47. Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 29–30; see also Tigay, "Was There an Integrated Gilgamesh Epic?" p. 217.

48. Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 107.

3. Gilgamesh and Enkidu

1. Jacobsen, "How Did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk?" passim; Jacobsen came to this conclusion independently, but notes (on p. 70, n. 1) that he learned after he had finished his article that Küchler, *Beiträge zur Kenntnis der Assyrisch-Babylonischen Medizin*, p. 124, "also mentions sexual intercourse between the heroes as a possibility. He does not, however, go further into the problem."

2. As in previous chapters, line numbers for the Epic's Standard version here and throughout are taken from Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*. For the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, see, as noted in chapter 2, n. 19, Langdon, *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Line numbers for this text are given according to the transcription found in Huehnergard, *Grammar*, pp. 475–484.

3. Jacobsen, "How Did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk?" p. 63.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 72.

7. Although see Kilmer, "Note on an Overlooked Word-Play," p. 129: "Just exactly what else Gilgamesh did to oppress the men and women, girls and boys of Uruk remains unclear, though some sort of sexual harassment is indicated. It should be obvious, in any event, that Enkidu is created specifically to be Gilgamesh's match in ... sexual appetite." Also note Kramer, "Epic of Gilgamesh," p. 9, who, in his discussion of Gilgamesh's oppression of Uruk, speaks of Gilgamesh's "unreasonable demands for the satisfaction of his Rabelaisian sex appetite"; see too Kramer, *From the Tablets of Sumer*, p. 211, and Held, "Parallels," p. 135, who speaks of "Gilgamesh's extraordinary sexual demands on the youthful populace of Uruk."

8. Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," pp. 234–235, n. 7. On the date of this article's composition in the mid-1980s, as opposed to the date of its publication in 1990, see the comments of the editors Abusch, Huehnergard, and Steinkeller in the volume's preface and acknowledgements, p. v. For the fullest available discussion of the issue of Uruk's oppression, see Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 178–191; for the most recent analyses, see especially Cooper, "Buddies in Babylonia," pp. 77–81; Klein, "A New Look at the 'Oppression of Uruk' Episode."

9. To my discussion of Jacobsen here, cf. Cooper, "Buddies in Babylonia," pp. 73–75, who (mistakenly, as my comments below will suggest) reads the later Jacobsen as "completely abandon[ing] his 1930 idea of a homosexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu."

10. Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 218 and the starred note on the bottom of the page. But cf. Held, "Parallels," p. 137, who (mistakenly in my opinion) claims that in his discussion of the Gilgamesh Epic in *The Treasures of Darkness*, "Jacobsen makes no reference to homosexuality."

11. Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," p. 245. In this piece, moreover, as opposed to the analysis he offers in *The Treasures of Darkness*,

Jacobsen does not consider the relationship as described in the Old Babylonian version to a growing-up “phase” (which Jacobsen in this essay suggests belongs only to the later Standard version of the Epic). See “Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision,” p. 249.

12. See CAD 6(H), pp. 2b–3a, s.v. *ḫabābu* B; Moran, “New Evidence from Mari,” p. 31, n. 3. See also the additional references in support of this translation assembled by Cooper, “Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu,” p. 43, n. 22; Cooper, “Buddies in Babylonia,” p. 80, n. 50; Foster, “Gilgamesh,” p. 25; Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 274, note on col. i, line 34, of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet; and Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 24; cf. Speiser, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” p. 75, n. 27.

13. As is reflected, for example, in the translations of Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 57–59; Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 10–11; Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 11–12; and Speiser, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” p. 76. But see the older restorations [*a-na-ku ki-m]a aš-ša-te eli-šu aḫ-pu-up*, [*kima aš-ša-te] e-li-šu taḫ-[pu-up]*, and [*ša (?) at-ta kima aš-ša-te] e-li-šu taḫ-p[u-pu]*], proposed in the collation of Thompson, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 15 (Thompson’s Tablet I, col. v, lines 36 and 47, col. vi, line 4), and adopted by Foster, “Gilgamesh,” pp. 26–27 (at least at col. v, line 36), and by Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, pp. 81–82, 86 (although see the cautions I have raised about this translation above, in chapter 2, n. 29). Note also that George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 10–11, reads in each of the Standard version dream descriptions that Gilgamesh “loved” the metaphorical representation of Enkidu “like a wife,” and that he “caressed” and “embraced” it. George, that is, seems to read *three* verbs in the Akkadian text as opposed to the *two* (*rāmu* and *ḫabābu*) that most commentators assume. George is dependent here on his own critical edition of the text of Gilgamesh, which, as I noted in the prologue, I was unable to consult before this volume went to press; consequently, I cannot be certain of the precise Akkadian text on which George’s translation is based. But, for my purposes here, it is of no matter: whatever the specifics of George’s translation, he certainly agrees with most other commentators regarding the eroticized language Gilgamesh uses in the Standard version to describe his visions of Enkidu.

14. See, for example, Cooper, “Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu,” p. 43, n. 22, for whom *ḫabābu* is “most certainly a euphemism for sexual intercourse”; Moran, “New Evidence from Mari,” p. 31, n. 3, who does not wish to exclude the “connotations of dalliance”; Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 274, note on col. i, line 34, of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, who writes, “the word could refer to sexual intercourse”; and Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 54, who, similar to Cooper, maintains, “the verb *ḫabābu* clearly carries a sexual meaning.”

15. Although, in the Enkidu-Shamhat lovemaking passage, the verb appears in the Dt conjugation as opposed to the G conjugation used in the dream accounts.

16. Although, as in n. 15, the verb appears in a different conjugation in the Enkidu-Shamhat lovemaking passage than it does in the axe-dream account (the Dt versus the G).

17. Although brief, the premier discussion of the differences between the Old Babylonian dream accounts and those of the Standard version is that of Cooper, “Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu,” pp. 39–41.

18. On the translation, see Huehnergard, *Grammar*, p. 475, n. 3.

19. Reading *su-mu-ku-nim-ma ka-ka-bu! ša-ma-i for ib-ba-šu-nim-ma ka-ka-bu! ša-ma-i*, and translating *samāku* as “to heap”; on *samāku* = *paḫāru*, “to heap,” see Frankena, *Briefe aus der Leidener Sammlung*, letter 11, line 39, pp. 10–11. This reading was suggested to me, and the Frankena reference pointed out to me, while I was still in graduate school, by my late teacher William L. Moran, and it is a great pleasure and indeed honor to acknowledge here Professor Moran’s contribution to my work and, more generally, to acknowledge how grateful I am for all he taught me

about the Akkadian language, about the Epic of Gilgamesh, about Mesopotamian religion, and about many other aspects of Mesopotamian culture and the cultures of the ancient Near East.

20. On the lacuna in this line, see below, n. 26.

21. In the Old Babylonian version Enkidu grieves over his failing strength and slackening muscles, weakness that is presumably a consequence of the leisurely ways of city life that he has adopted by this point in the Epic.

22. See Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 134, n. 157, and also p. 330; Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 147b, s.v. Nergal.

23. Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 29.

24. For *minde* meaning “certainly,” “indeed,” “for sure,” see Moran and Hallo, “First Tablet of the SB Recension of the Anzu Myth,” pp. 94–95 and n. 46 on p. 94; this rendering adopted in the translations of Cooper, “Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu,” p. 43, and George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 102.

25. Cooper, “Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu,” pp. 39–40, similarly suggests the Old Babylonian dream accounts may describe two stages in the development of Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s relationship, although the specifics of his interpretation differ from the reading I offer here.

26. While Langdon, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 211, ventured a reading of *kisrum*, “meteor,” in col. i, line 7, of the *editio princeps* of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, the initial signs are utterly unclear. In the Supplement to *AHW*, Wolfram von Soden suggests *arrum*, “weapon” (*AHW* 3, p. 1544, s.v. *arru(m)* IV); Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 74, note on line 231, reads *šiprum*, “the thing sent (by Anu).”

27. Kilmer, “Note on an Overlooked Word-Play,” p. 128.

28. See CAD 8 (K), p. 316b, s.v. *kezru*; also Kilmer, “Note on an Overlooked Word-Play,” p. 128; Lambert, “Prostitution,” p. 132; Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, pp. 265–266.

29. CAD 8 (K), p. 316a, s.v. *kezēru*.

30. Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. xix.

31. Although the precise nature of the *assinnu*’s role in the Ishtar cult is unclear; see CAD 1, Part II (A), pp. 341b–342b, s.v. *assinnu*.

32. Kilmer, “Note on an Overlooked Word-Play,” p. 129.

33. See also Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 137; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 102; Speiser, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” p. 77.

34. The brother/side pun in this passage has been noted by many: for example, Cooper, “Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu,” p. 40; Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 152, n. 4; Foster, “Gilgamesh,” p. 27; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 102.

35. Unfortunately, as the brackets in my translation indicate, the line is fragmentary, and so the interpretation that sees Anat’s words as a sexual proposition cannot be regarded as secure. For discussion, see Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, pp. 193–194; Dressler, “The Metamorphosis of a Lacuna,” pp. 211–217.

36. Fox, *Song of Songs*, pp. xii–xiii, 8, 12–13, 136; White, *Language of Love*, pp. 95–96, 130.

37. This reference brought to my attention by Pope, *Song of Songs*, pp. 480–481. See also, from second-century BCE Qumran, the Genesis Apocryphon scroll (1QapGen), in which, in column ii, Lamech is addressed by his wife Bitenosh as “my brother” (this reference brought to my attention by Moore, *Tobit*, p. 190).

38. The bibliography on sacred marriage is vast. Kramer, *Sacred Marriage Rite*, remains a standard source, although some of the conclusions of this work are now considered outdated. See, more recently, Cooper, “Sacred Marriage,” pp. 81–96; also note the comments of Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, pp. 97–110.

39. The translation is by Jacobsen, *Harps That Once*, p. 341; see also, most recently, Vanstiphout, *Epics of Sumerian Kings*, p. 155.

40. The translation is by Kramer, "Set Me Free, My Sister," in *ANET*, p. 645b. But cf. Jacobsen, *Harps That Once*, pp. 8–9, who takes the terms *brother* and *sister* literally and understands the text to be a dialogue between Inanna's mythological lover, Dumuzi/Tammuz, and his sister Geshtinanna. For arguments against Jacobsen's position, see Alster, "Marriage and Love," p. 17, n. 17; also Alster's own translation of this hymn on pp. 22–23 (no. 12). The most up-to-date discussion of the poem of which I am aware is that of Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, pp. 71–73.

41. Cooper, "Sacred Marriage," p. 85, doubts whether the Shu-sin texts are actually to be associated with the sacred marriage. The issue is one that need not concern us here; whether the texts are part of the sacred marriage tradition or are, as Cooper suggests, "more at home in the harem," they still use the language of eroticized brotherhood that I seek to document.

42. "Lettuce Is My Hair," translated by Kramer, in *ANET*, p. 644a-b; see also the translation of Jacobsen, *Harps That Once*, p. 93.

43. "Life Is Your Coming," translated by Kramer in *ANET*, p. 644b.

44. The examples offered here, which have been chosen because of their ready accessibility in *ANET*, could be easily multiplied; see, for example, Kramer, *Sacred Marriage Rite*, pp. 97–101, 104–105; Alster, "Marriage and Love," p. 17, n. 16, and the references listed there; also, in that same article, the poem translated on p. 21 (no. 8), and in addition, Alster, "Sumerian Love Song SRT 31," pp. 1–11, to which cf. Alster's discussion of this poem in his "Sumerian Love Songs," pp. 142–146 (text no. 4). See too, in Alster's "Sumerian Love Songs" article, the eroticized language of brotherhood used in text no. 5, pp. 146–152.

45. See Alster, "Marriage and Love," p. 16, n. 13, and the references listed there; Nissinen, "Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu," p. 586 and n. 7, and the references listed there. Also see Cooper, "Kuss," p. 377a; Westenholz, "A Forgotten Love Song," p. 415; Westenholz, "Love Lyrics from the Ancient Near East," pp. 2476–2477.

46. The line numbers here are those of the Hittite tablet, as analyzed by Stefanini, "Enkidu's Dream," pp. 40–47; the translation is by Beckman, "The Hittite Gilgamesh," p. 163.

47. See *CAD* 15 (S), p. 215a–217a, s.v. *sekreu*.

48. Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 6. See similarly Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 52; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 5. Other commentators understand this line to mean that Enkidu was created in the image of Anu (for example, Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, p. 71, followed by van Nortwick, *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled*, p. 14). Jack M. Sasson argues, moreover, that while the gods had asked Aruru to create Enkidu as a double for Gilgamesh, she creates him as a "double of the god Anu" and thereby changes the future of the Gilgamesh-Enkidu relationship (Sasson, "Gilgamesh Epic," p. 1025b).

49. See, for example, *CAD* 21 (Z), p. 116b, s.v. *zikru* B; Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, p. 68 (but on this translation, see above, n. 13); George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 4; Oppenheim, "Mesopotamian Mythology II," p. 23; Speiser, "Epic of Gilgamesh," p. 74. For a somewhat different interpretation, see Sasson, "Some Literary Motifs," p. 272.

50. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 52.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 126, nn. 9, 10.

52. For the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet generally, see, as in chapter 2, Jastrow and Clay, *Old Babylonian Version of the Gilgamesh Epic*; for this particular text, which is not reflected in Jastrow's and Clay's *editio princeps*, see Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 142; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 108; and, on the placing of this fragmentary text at the end of the wrestling-match scene, Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 76 (Parpola's line 113 of Tablet II); Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 59.

53. Sperl, "Genesis 41:10," pp. 114–115, n. 12; Cooper, "Kuss," pp. 375b–379a. Cooper specifically describes the kiss Gilgamesh and Enkidu exchange after their wrestling match as a "token of friendship" (p. 377a–b).

54. For further discussion, see Finkelstein, "Recent Studies in Cuneiform Law," pp. 251–252; Greengus, "Old Babylonian Marriage Ceremonies," pp. 60, 68; Landsberger, "Jungfräulichkeit," pp. 41–105; Ravn, "Gilgamesh and the Wives of Uruk," pp. 12–13; von Soden, "Gab es in Babylonien die Inanspruchnahme des *ius primae noctis*?" pp. 103–106.

55. While the references in the marital scene to Ishhara, a name of the goddess Ishtar (see the Epic of Atrahasis, Tablet I, line 304), suggest to some commentators that it must be the sacred marriage that is about to be celebrated, it seems rather that we should understand Ishhara here as a reference to an Ishtar priestess who apparently was present at all marriages (as in the Epic of Atrahasis, Tablet I, lines 299–305). Note, moreover, that interpreting this scene as a sacred marriage raises as many interpretive problems as it claims to solve. For example, while Enkidu can logically be understood as objecting to the Gilgamesh's bedding the bride if this is done on account of Gilgamesh's rather tyrannical presumption of *ius primae noctis*, there is no logical reason why Enkidu should object to Gilgamesh's participation in the sacred marriage, which was a well-established and accepted part of Mesopotamian ritual tradition. Also, if this scene is to be interpreted as sacred marriage, why should Gilgamesh so enthusiastically seek to participate in it here, yet reject what seems to be a proposition to participate in the sacred marriage with Ishtar in Tablet VI?

56. See further below, p. 78 and n. 98.

57. In the *editio princeps*, Langdon, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 218, read *i-tu-ru* (Langdon's line 19 of the Tablet's reverse, col. ii), but commentators have since suggested the better reading is *i-ša-ru*. See, for example, Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 152, n. 11; Huehnergard, *Grammar*, p. 482.

58. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 152, n. 11.

59. On the difference between the Old Babylonian and Standard versions here, see Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 68.

60. Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, p. 266. This reading is also suggested by van Nortwick, *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled*, p. 18 (although he does not himself advocate an eroticized interpretation of the combat), and by Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 58.

61. Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, p. 266; see further, on feet as euphemistic for genitalia in West Semitic tradition, Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, p. 14; Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus*, p. 78; Wolfson, "Images of God's Feet," pp. 145, 164.

62. She does, however, get mentioned again, in Enkidu's deathbed scene in Tablet VII.

63. Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 49.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

65. Following here most translators: for example, Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," p. 157; Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 61; Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, p. 187 (but on this translation, see above, n. 13); George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 65; Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 70. As Abusch points out, however ("Ishtar's Proposal," pp. 157–158, n. 36), some read "friend" as the subject, rather than object, of the verb "to cover"—for example, Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 93; CAD 8 (K), p. 299a, s.v. *katāmu*—thus translating (so CAD), "my friend veiled his face like a bride."

66. See Bird, "Harlot as Heroine," p. 134, n. 5, and the references there. See also Lambert, "Prostitution," p. 141.

67. Kilmer, "Note on an Overlooked Word-Play," p. 130.

68. For example, Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, p. 103, suggests that Gilgamesh

might reject here “the love of women in favor of the more solid and lasting male bonding seen between Gilgamesh and Enkidu,” and although Damrosch does not at this point define what he means by male bonding or comment on its possible erotic or sexual characteristics, he later (p. 203) does speak of the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as being like that of “husband and wife,” with Enkidu “tak[ing] the place of women in Gilgamesh’s heart.” See somewhat similarly Vanstiphout, “Craftsmanship of *Sîn-leqi-unninnī*,” p. 62, although Vanstiphout claims only that Gilgamesh prefers his “exclusive friendship” with Enkidu to a marriage with Ishtar: as to whether the exclusive friendship with Enkidu should be seen as sexual, Vanstiphout maintains an “open mind” (n. 77 on p. 62). The question of whether Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar because he prefers a sexual relationship with Enkidu is also raised by Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 23, although his answer is ultimately no.

69. Abusch, “Ishtar’s Proposal,” pp. 147–148; see similarly Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, pp. 41–42.

70. I should make clear here that although it is Abusch, more than any commentator, who points to the peculiarities of Gilgamesh’s rejection, the explanation he offers does not look toward the suggestion that Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar in favor of a relationship with Enkidu. He proposes rather that, although ostensibly an offer of marriage, what Ishtar really extends to Gilgamesh is a death threat, so to speak; more specifically, an offer to become a functionary of the netherworld. See Abusch, “Ishtar’s Proposal,” passim; also Abusch, “Development and Meaning,” p. 615, n. 3, and p. 618, and my comments in chapter 2, n. 34, and chapter 5.

71. Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 46. Walls further suggests (on pp. 47–49) that the various stories to which Gilgamesh alludes in deriding Ishtar for her past affairs, especially the stories that describe her “unconventional couplings” with animal consorts, may be intended to indicate that Gilgamesh too is to be understood as susceptible to “an unconventional and socially unsanctioned passion [for Enkidu],” that “Gilgamesh’s listing of Ishtar’s animal affairs may therefore be a subtle defense of his own unconventional liaison with Enkidu,” that “Gilgamesh’s absence of desire for Ishtar may represent ... the homoerotic rejection of heterosexual attraction.”

72. For the Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment, see, as in chapter 2, Meissner, *Ein altbabylonisches Fragment*. For discussion on whether Gilgamesh was actually on his way to see Utnapishtim when he encountered Siduri or only wandering aimlessly, see, as again in chapter 2, Abusch, “Gilgamesh’s Request and Siduri’s Denial, Part 1,” pp. 9–14; Abusch, “Mourning the Death of a Friend,” pp. 55–59 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*); also Abusch, “Development and Meaning,” p. 615, n. 3, and pp. 617–618.

73. Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 218, starred note on the bottom of the page.

74. Kilmer, “Note on an Overlooked Word-Play,” p. 130.

75. Cooper, “Buddies in Babylonia,” p. 80, paraphrasing Lambert, “Prostitution,” p. 157, n. 31.

76. Lambert, “Prostitution,” pp. 156–157, n. 31.

77. Translation Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, p. 217; see also Lambert, “Prostitution,” p. 151.

78. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 34.

79. Although note again that the Ugaritic text in which the language of eroticized brother- and sisterhood seems to appear is fragmentary: above, n. 35.

80. Olyan, “‘Surpassing the Love of Women.’” To the references Olyan cites, add Fishbane, “Treaty Background of Amos 1 11,” p. 314 and nn. 7 and 8 on that page.

81. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 86.

82. See further the discussions of Bottéro and Petschow, “Homosexualität,” pp.

459b–468b; Cooper, “Buddies in Babylonia,” pp. 83–85; Nissinen, *Homoeeroticism in the Biblical World*, pp. 19–36; Olyan, “‘And with a Male,’” pp. 192–194.

83. Translation Roth, *Law Collections*, p. 160, with some modifications. In particular, I have rendered the verb *nāku*, translated by Roth as “sodomize” according to “the context” (*Law Collections*, p. 192, n. 15), in accord with the more literal and less pejorative “to have intercourse” (see CAD 11, part 1 [N], p. 198a, s.v. *nāku*).

84. Cf., however, Lambert, “Prostitution,” p. 147.

85. So Bottéro and Petschow, “Homosexualität,” p. 462.

86. See, somewhat similarly, Cooper, “Buddies in Babylonia,” pp. 84–85; Driver and Miles, *Assyrian Laws*, p. 71.

87. Olyan, “‘And with a Male,’” pp. 195, 205; Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19,” pp. 96–99; Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power*, pp. 75–79. See further my discussion in chapter 1.

88. Olyan, note, would not agree with the use I make of his work here, as he maintains that, while status is not of issue in Israel, social position probably is a consideration in the Middle Assyrian Laws. See Olyan, “‘And with a Male,’” p. 194.

89. Olyan, “‘And with a Male,’” passim, especially pp. 183–188; Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19,” passim, especially pp. 96–98; Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation,” passim, especially pp. 148–154, 157.

90. Lambert, “Prostitution,” p. 147. Note, however, that Lambert would not agree with the conclusions I draw from his analysis here, but rather suggests that in MAL A §20, *nāku* is anomalously used to describe male-male intercourse that was a matter of mutual consent, the scribe being forced to use the verb contrary to its usual sense because “his standard vocabulary had no word expressing mutual sex acts.”

91. The terminology is from Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 31.

92. Nissinen, *Homoeeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 26; see similarly Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 15.

93. All that follows contra, in particular, Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 78, who argues Enkidu throughout the Epic is rendered as subordinate to Gilgamesh. In addition to the arguments I present here, note that Halperin’s description of Enkidu as younger than Gilgamesh relies on an idiosyncratic reading in Speiser, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” who in Tablet VIII, col. ii, lines 8–9 and Tablet X, col. i, lines 53–54 (Speiser’s enumeration), suggests that Enkidu is described as *quṭānu*, which Speiser translates (following a suggestion made by P. Jensen in 1900) as “younger” (see Speiser, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” p. 87b, n. 137). But this reading *quṭānu* is not supported either by the older collation of Thompson, *Epic of Gilgamesh* (see pp. 48 and 56) or by Parpola’s more recent edition (*Epic of Gilgamesh*; see pp. 99 and 103). Nor is there even an Akkadian word *quṭānu* according to the standard authorities (see *AHW* and *CAD*).

94. For the translation of *šutamḫuru(m)* as “to make equal,” see Cooper, “Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu,” p. 40; Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 58–59, 137; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 1–11, 103; cf. CAD 10, part 1 (M), p. 70b, s.v. *maḫāru*; Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 11–12; Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 85–87, 275, note on col. ii, line 1, of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet.

95. See *AHW* 3, p. 1161b, s. *šanānu*; Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 194, n. 40; Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 6. The more usual translation of *šanānu* in this passage is “to rival, vie,” advocated by CAD 17, Part I (Š), p. 369a, s.v. *šanānu*, and reflected in the translations of Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 52; Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 6; Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, p. 68 (but on this translation, see above, n. 13); George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 5; Speiser, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” p. 74.

96. This latter line brought to my attention by Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p.

97. Indeed, even Halperin, who cites Shamhat's speech in support of his interpretation regarding the Epic's insistence on Gilgamesh's superiority, admits that her words may simply be an attempt "to rouse Enkidu by appealing to his competitive spirit." See Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 78 and p. 177, n. 18.

98. According to most commentators, Gilgamesh wins the wrestling match: see, for example, Foster, "Gilgamesh," p. 32; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 12; Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 14; Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2329; Oppenheim, "Mesopotamian Mythology II," p. 30; Sasson, "Some Literary Motifs," p. 266; Sasson, "Gilgamesh Epic," p. 1025b. Jacobsen, however, suggests that because Gilgamesh "sinks down on one knee" at the end of the combat (according to the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. vi, lines 20–21; this episode is not preserved in the Standard version), it is Enkidu who should be understood as the victor. See Jacobsen, "Classical Statement," p. 83; Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 199; Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," p. 237. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 141, seems likewise to understand Enkidu as victorious; cf. also Kramer, "Epic of Gilgamesh," p. 9; Wolff, "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life," p. 397; and Langdon (the publisher of the *editio princeps* of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet), "The Epic of Gilgamesh," p. 36; this reference brought to my attention by Keppler, *The Literature of the Second Self*, p. 216, n. 40. Yet another possible interpretation, as proposed here, is that the wrestling match ends in a standstill.

99. For the suggestion that it is Uruk's young warriors or "officers" who speak to Gilgamesh in this second passage in the Standard version, see George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 28, who relies here on his own critical edition of the text, which, as I noted in the prologue, I was unable to consult before this volume went into production.

100. Lambert, "Gilgamesh in Literature and Art," p. 47; this reference brought to my attention by Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 39 and p. 194, n. 41.

101. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 26.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

103. Doty, *Myths of Masculinity*, pp. 79, 82.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

105. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, pp. 76–77.

106. Hammond and Jablow, "Gilgamesh and the Sundance Kid," p. 242 (cited from the original publication of this article found in *The Making of Masculinities*).

107. Van Nortwick, *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled*, p. 18; Beye, "Gilgamesh, Lolita, and Huckleberry Finn," p. 40.

108. Beye, "Gilgamesh, Lolita, and Huckleberry Finn," p. 40.

109. Lambert, "Prostitution," pp. 156–157, n. 31.

110. Cooper, "Buddies in Babylonia," p. 80, and n. 50 on that page; see also Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 54.

111. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, pp. 23, 33–34.

112. *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

113. Foster, "Gilgamesh," p. 22.

114. *Ibid.*, p. 25, citing Moran, "New Evidence from Mari," p. 31, n. 3, and Cooper, "Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu," p. 43, n. 22.

115. Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, pp. 266–269.

116. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, pp. 75, 81.

117. Oppenheim, *Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 215.

118. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 75.

119. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

120. *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

121. Ibid., p. 81.
122. Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 90, n. 80.
123. Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, p. 255.
124. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 23.
125. Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, p. 268.
126. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, pp. 20, 22.
127. Ibid., p. 24 and n. 19 on p. 145.
128. Ibid., p. 24.
129. Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, p. 255.
130. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 80; see similarly Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," p. 144.
131. On *pašāhu*, "to be at peace," in Tablet I, line 7, see above, chapter 2, n. 41.
132. See also, in critique of Leick's (and in addition Foster's) asceticized interpretation, Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 46.

4. The Liminal Hero, Part 1

1. Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, as quoted in Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 94; Turner does not, unfortunately, give a page number for his citation. This quote was originally brought to my attention by Deflem, "Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion," p. 7.
2. Deflem, "Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion," pp. 7–8, paraphrasing Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 94.
3. Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pp. 43–44.
4. As Turner points out, van Gennep's classification of these sorts of rituals as rites of passage has not necessarily been widely followed; see Turner, "Rites of Passage," p. 386b; also, La Fontaine, *Initiation*, pp. 26, 28.
5. Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, p. 18. This discussion of Eliade's brought to my attention by Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, p. 171.
6. Campbell, *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, p. 30.
7. Homans, "Jung," p. 212b.
8. Reinhold, "A Thousand Faces," p. 322.
9. Lefkowitz, "Myth of Joseph Campbell," p. 432; for another trenchant critique of Campbell, see Doniger (formerly O'Flaherty), "Origins of Myth-Making Man." Also in critique of Campbell, see Manganaro, *Myth*, pp. 151–185, and especially the references cited on pp. 165–167; Segal, *Joseph Campbell*, especially pp. 136–140.
10. Sandler and Reeck, "Masks of Joseph Campbell," pp. 7, 8–9.
11. Long, "The Dreams of Professor Campbell," p. 169 (cited from the reprinted version of this article found in *Paths to the Power of Myth*). For other critiques of Eliade's work, see Stenski, "Mircea Eliade," and, especially, Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, pp. 88–103; Smith, *To Take Place*, pp. 1–23.
12. Doniger (formerly O'Flaherty), "Origins of Myth-Making Man," p. 182 (cited from the reprinted edition of this essay found in *Paths to the Power of Myth*).
13. According to Turner's widow, Edith Turner, Turner himself considered the Epic of Gilgamesh in some of his work on narrative; see Edith Turner, "The Literary Roots," p. 164. I have, however, been unable to find Turner's analysis; it is not included in the article to which Edith Turner's discussion refers (Turner, "Icelandic Family Saga"). Perhaps Turner's consideration of Gilgamesh is found in the unpublished paper on "Comparative Epic and Saga" that Turner mentions on p. 98 of his "Icelandic Family Saga" essay?
14. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, pp. 33, 38–41.
15. Turner, *Drums of Affliction*, pp. 273–274; this quote brought to my attention by

Segal, "Turner's Theory of Ritual," p. 332.

16. Turner, *Drums of Affliction*, p. 268; this quote brought to my attention by Segal, "Turner's Theory of Ritual," p. 332.

17. Turner, "Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga," p. 352 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *The Translation of Culture*).

18. See, for example, Bell, *Ritual*, p. 40.

19. Deflem, "Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion," pp. 7–8, provides a good discussion of this aspect of Turner's intellectual biography; see also the charmingly personal account provided by Edith Turner that describes aspects of liminality the Turners themselves were experiencing in their own lives during the time Victor Turner was first reading van Gennep: Edith Turner, "Prologue: From the Ndembu to Broadway," pp. 7–8, and (briefly) Edith Turner, "Prologue: Exploring the Trail," p. xii. Turner himself alludes to the same idea in his "Process, System, and Symbol," p. 159 (cited from the reprinted edition of this essay found in *On the Edge of the Bush*).

20. The phrase "diachronic profile" is from Turner, "Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga," p. 351 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *The Translation of Culture*).

21. Deflem, "Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion," p. 7.

22. Edith Turner, in "Prologue: From the Ndembu to Broadway," p. 8, notes that "at that time [that is, the early 1960s] hardly anyone had considered its [liminality's] nature, except for van Gennep himself and Henri Junod [in his *Life of a South African Tribe*]." Edith Turner goes on to state that even Victor Turner's teacher, Max Gluckman, made only a solitary reference to liminality, in his 1962 essay on van Gennep (Gluckman, "*Les Rites de Passage*," p. 3).

23. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 94–130; see further the discussion in Deflem, "Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion," p. 13.

24. Turner, "Process, System, and Symbol," p. 159 (cited from the reprinted edition of this essay found in *On the Edge of the Bush*). For the reference to Henri Junod's work that Turner cites, see Junod's *Life of a South African Tribe*.

25. Segal, "Turner's Theory of Ritual," p. 330.

26. Turner, *Drums of Affliction*, p. 1; this quote brought to my attention by Segal, "Turner's Theory of Ritual," p. 330.

27. Turner, "Ritual as Communication," p. 59.

28. Turner, *Drums of Affliction*, p. 2; this quote brought to my attention by Segal, "Turner's Theory of Ritual," p. 330.

29. Segal, "Turner's Theory of Ritual," p. 330.

30. Turner, "Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga," p. 353 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *The Translation of Culture*).

31. *Ibid.*, p. 369.

32. Turner, "Social Dramas and the Stories About Them," p. 158 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *Critical Inquiry*).

33. Turner, "Icelandic Family Saga," p. 118.

34. Turner, however, suggested in his 1971 piece that in the Icelandic sagas, as in certain social dramas elsewhere, "the contradictions between forces making for centralization and forces making for decentralization, between extreme individualism and family loyalty, between kinship and citizenship, and, perhaps, also between a bare subsistence economy and the aspiration (among many leading Icelanders) to an aristocratic lifestyle" were never resolved; see Turner, "Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga," p. 372 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *The Translation of Culture*).

35. Turner, "Myth and Symbol," pp. 576a–577b, 581b.

36. Ronald L. Grimes calls Turner the "most influential" ritual theorist of the twentieth century; see Grimes's "Ritual," p. 264.

37. See, for example, the questions raised and critiques offered by Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited*, pp. 13–26; Alexander, “Ritual and Current Studies of Ritual,” pp. 150–151; Grimes, “Ritual Studies,” p. 23 (cited from the original publication of this article found in *Religious Studies Review*; some further critical questions are raised on pp. 155–157 of the reprinted version, found in *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*); Grimes, “Victor Turner’s Definition,” pp. 141–146; Grimes, “Ritual,” pp. 266–267; La Fontaine, *Initiation*, p. 34; Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion*, pp. 258–263; Ray, “Turner,” p. 96a; Segal, “Turner’s Theory of Ritual,” p. 333.

38. Turner, “Variations on a Theme,” p. 43.

39. Taussig, “Transgression,” p. 350.

40. Turner, “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?” p. 295 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *On the Edge of the Bush*).

41. As opposed, say, to the cultures described in the essays collected in Herdt, ed., *Third Sex, Third Gender*.

42. “Liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.” Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

43. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 27–52, 305–318.

44. See further Grimes, “Ritual,” pp. 266–267.

45. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 49.

46. Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*.

47. Droogers, “Symbols of Marginality”; this reference brought to my attention by Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, p. 171.

48. Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, p. 172, citing Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 252–253.

49. Droogers, “Symbols of Marginality,” pp. 105–106.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 105; see also p. 118.

51. Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, p. 180.

52. Leach, “Why Did Moses Have a Sister?” p. 41.

53. Aycock, “The Fate of Lot’s Wife,” pp. 116–117.

54. Hendel, “Exodus in Biblical Memory,” p. 617.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 617; Hendel, “Sacrifice as a Cultural System,” p. 375.

56. Haldar, *The Notion of the Desert*, p. 5; Talmon, “The ‘Desert Motif,’” pp. 50, 54; Talmon, “Wilderness,” p. 947b; Cohn, *Shape of Sacred Space*, pp. 7–23; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, pp. 35–36. The Haldar, Talmon, and Cohn references were all brought to my attention by Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, p. 35. See in addition my own article, “Why Is Miriam Also Among the Prophets?” pp. 47–80.

57. Moran, “Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia,” p. 2328; see similarly Moran, “Gilgamesh,” p. 559a; Moran, “Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism,” pp. 18–19; this latter reference brought to my attention by George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. xxxii–xxxiii. In “Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism,” p. 19, Moran cites Wolff, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life,” p. 393, n. 2, as having first proposed the importance of the three seven-day periods in the structure of Gilgamesh, although as Moran points out, Wolff did not explore the ritual imagery associated with these transformational episodes. See also, regarding Wolff’s intimations regarding rites-of-passage imagery in Gilgamesh, Wolff, *Study in the Narrative Structure*, p. 77.

58. Moran, “Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia,” pp. 2328–2330. See similarly, although somewhat less thoroughly, Moran, “Gilgamesh,” p. 559a; cf. also Sasson, “Some Literary Motifs,” p. 272.

59. Moran, “Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia,” p. 2328; see similarly Moran, “Gilgamesh,” p. 559a.

60. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance*, p. 79; see similarly Wolff, *Study in the Narrative Structure*, p. 89, although unlike Anderson, Wolff neglects the importance of Gilgamesh's ritual acts as markers of the hero's movement into liminality, focusing instead only on Gilgamesh's emotional distress after Enkidu's death.

61. Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," pp. 143–187, especially pp. 158–161, pp. 179–187; see similarly Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part I," p. 7, and Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part II," p. 11 (although in these latter two articles Abusch, as opposed to his "Ishtar's Proposal" article, does not explicitly evoke rites-of-passage language). Abusch elsewhere, without explicitly evoking rites-of-passage language, intimates that he finds rites-of-passage imagery also in the scene in which Gilgamesh envisions the netherworld in Tablet XII, as this vision, as Abusch sees it, "serves to teach Gilgamesh how to be a normal god and to induct him into his new identity" (by which Abusch means Gilgamesh's accustomed role in Mesopotamian tradition as a netherworld functionary); see Abusch's "Development and Meaning," p. 621.

62. Harris, *Gender and Aging*, pp. 35–36, 43. In Harris's understanding, this theme of initiation is present only in the Standard version, introduced there by the Standard version's author Sîn-leqi-unninnī and reflecting Sîn-leqi-unninnī's own experiences of being initiated into the guild of exorcist-priests. Somewhat kindred is Mircea Eliade's proposal that the Epic of Gilgamesh is the story of a failed initiation, one that posits that, while it is in fact possible for certain humans, including Gilgamesh, to become immortal, Gilgamesh fails to do so by not succeeding at the "initiatory ordeals" of staying awake for a week and of reaping the profit of an unexpected gift (the Plant of Rejuvenation). See Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas* 1, pp. 77–80.

63. Lefkowitz, "The Myth of Joseph Campbell," p. 432.

64. Mandell, "Liminality, Altered States, and the *Gilgamesh Epic*," p. 123. As I have noted above, Harris, *Gender and Aging*, pp. 35–36, also (problematically, in my opinion) reads the Gilgamesh Epic in terms of a "symbolic initiation," although, less problematically than Mandell, she is not dependent on Campbell in doing so.

65. Mandell, "Liminality, Altered States, and the *Gilgamesh Epic*," pp. 124–125.

66. As in previous chapters, line numbers for the Epic's Standard version here and throughout are taken from Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

67. Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 195, n. 56, paraphrasing Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, p. 221.

68. Mandell, "Liminality, Altered States, and the *Gilgamesh Epic*," p. 125.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

70. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

71. Myerhoff, Camino, and Edith Turner, "Rites of Passage," p. 382b.

72. Turner, "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?" p. 295 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *On the Edge of the Bush*). See similarly Turner, "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama," pp. 41–42.

73. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

74. This description comes from Leach, "Approaches to the Study of the Bible," p. 24 (cited from the reprinted edition of this essay found in *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*).

75. This description comes from Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 30.

76. Turner was not necessarily "given to sustained theoretical exposition, and he often let unclarity remain in his writings" (Ray, "Turner," p. 96a; see similarly Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 29). However, in one of the last lectures Turner gave during his lifetime (in 1982), which was published posthumously, he included a chart that more systematically than he does elsewhere describes 1. his

notions of social drama, 2. the relation of social drama to the tripartite ritual process of separation-liminality-reaggregation, and 3. his understanding of the three crucial features of the liminal phase on which I am focusing here. These are, first, the deconstruction and recombination of familiar cultural configurations, second, the simplification of social-structural relationships (the absolute authority of leaders over liminars and *communitas* among liminal entities), and third, the communication of the *sacra*, the secret symbols of a community's unity and continuity. See Turner, "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?" p. 293 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *On the Edge of the Bush*).

77. Myerhoff, Camino, and Edith Turner, "Rites of Passage," p. 383b.

78. Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 98.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 101; this quote brought to my attention by Perdue, "Liminality as a Social Setting," p. 117, n. 20.

80. Turner, "Myth and Symbol," p. 577b.

81. Myerhoff, Camino, and Edith Turner, "Rites of Passage," pp. 381b–382a.

82. Turner, "Myth and Symbol," p. 577b.

83. See, for example, Turner, "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?" p. 295 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *On the Edge of the Bush*).

84. Myerhoff, Camino, and Edith Turner, "Rites of Passage," p. 382b.

85. On the nature of Gilgamesh's oppressive behavior, see further my discussion in chapter 3 and, as there, Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 178–191.

86. Mandell, "Liminality, Altered States, and the *Gilgamesh Epic*," p. 126. See also the comments of Foster regarding Gilgamesh in the Epic's early scenes as the "shepherd" who oppresses, rather than protects his flock, or his people ("Gilgamesh," pp. 22–23). Similarly, Wolff, "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life," p. 394, writes that Gilgamesh, who should be the shepherd of his people, instead behaves among them as a "wild ox."

87. See somewhat similarly Kirk, *Myth*, p. 147; Wolff, "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life," p. 394.

88. Note similarly in this regard how Gilgamesh seemingly requires the approval and even permission of the elders of Uruk before he and Enkidu embark on their expedition to face Huwawa/Humbaba; I discuss this very interesting scene more thoroughly in chapter 5. For the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, see, as in previous chapters, Langdon, *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Line numbers are given according to the transcription found in Huehnergard, *Grammar*, pp. 475–484.

89. See CAD 6(H), p. 14a, s.v. *ḫaḏī-ū'a-amēlu*; Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 10, n. 13; this latter reference brought to my attention by Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 194, n. 6.

90. Falkenstein, "Gilgameš," p. 357a. This reference brought to my attention by Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. xxvii, daggered note on the bottom of the page.

91. See similarly the Standard version, Tablet VIII, lines 3–6, where Gilgamesh, in his eulogy over the dead Enkidu, speaks of his friend's mother as a gazelle (*ṣabitu*), of his father as a wild donkey (*akkānu*), and of the milk of wild asses (*ša si[rrimī] še-zib-bi-šun*) on which Enkidu was raised. Reading here *sirrimī*, "wild asses," in line 5 with most commentators: see, for example, CAD 15 (S), p. 318b, s.v. *sirrimu*; CAD 17, Part 3 (Š), p. 149a, s.v. *šizbu*. However, Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 99, reads *bīlī*, "cattle, wild beasts."

92. Lambert, "Prostitution," p. 127.

93. Mobley, "Wild Man," p. 221, n. 20, quoting Kirk, *Myth*, p. 146.

94. Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 98.

95. Indeed, as the narrative continues, an older generation of interpreters read (Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, col. ii, lines 31–34):

She grasped his hand,
Like a child, she leads him,
To the hut of the shepherd,
The place of the fold.

See, for example, E. A. Speiser, "The Epic of Gilgamesh," in *ANET*, p. 77a. The reading "like a child" has also been championed recently by Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, p. 91, and Sasson, "Gilgamesh Epic," p. 1025b (the Gardner and Maier translation, however, must be used with caution; see Moran, "Utnapishtim Revisited," pp. 13–14). More commonly, however, the reading "like a child" is now rejected in favor of the reading "like a goddess," suggesting that Shamhat leads Enkidu to the shepherds' camp in the same way that deities lead supplicants to their audience before other deities in Old Babylonian presentation texts. This was originally suggested by Renger, "Notes Brèves," p. 190, and has been followed by Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 138; Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 13; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 13; Huehnergard, *Grammar*, p. 478; and Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 15. See further Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1," p. 8, n. 37.

96. On Shamhat's dual role as sexual and maternal in this passage, see further Harris, "Images of Women," pp. 223–224 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *Lingering Over Words*).

97. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

98. See Foster "Gilgamesh," p. 31.

99. Leach, "Approaches to the Study of the Bible," p. 16 (cited from the reprinted edition of this essay found in *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*); this quote brought to my attention by Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, p. 173.

100. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, p. 38.

101. Also worthy of note is the dream scene at the beginning of Tablet VII in which Enkidu envisions the gods decreeing that he must die as punishment for the two heroes' killing of Huwawa/Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. As Enkidu reports the gods' deliberations, the sun god Shamash protests to the god Enlil that punishing the heroes is unfair because both Huwawa/Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven were killed at "your command." Some commentators, however, emend "your" to "my," in accord with the sentiments of Tablets III, line 46, and V, line 130, and see here further evidence that Shamash was the instigator of the Huwawa/Humbaba expedition. See, for example, Beckman, "The Hittite Gilgamesh," p. 163; Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 59, and n. 2 on that page. Because, however, this part of the Epic is preserved for us only in a prose fragment written in Hittite, it is precarious to say anything too definitive about this passage. The most recent treatment is the translation of Beckman cited above; the most substantive commentary is provided by Stefanini, "Enkidu's Dream," pp. 40–47.

102. Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 100.

103. For the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, see, as in previous chapters, Jastrow and Clay, *An Old Babylonian Version of the Gilgamesh Epic*.

104. See, for example, the several masks pictured in Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 41, and in Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. xxx.

105. Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 79–80.

106. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 127, n. 21; Huehnergard, *Grammar*, p. 581.

107. Leach, "Why Did Moses Have a Sister?" p. 37.

108. Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 98.

109. Vanstiphout, "Craftsmanship of *Sîn-leqi-unninnî*," p. 47, somewhat similarly argues that the journey to the Cedar Forest "leads the heroes on to the highest

satisfaction,” but only “for just one brief moment.” Yet while I agree with Vanstiphout that there is a sort of denouement at the beginning of Tablet VI, with the successful conclusion of the Huwawa/Humbaba episode, and also agree with him that this denouement is only briefly sustained, I see no justification for his claims that what throws the Epic’s story back into crisis is that “the *ambitions* of the young hero (or heroes) [are] accompanied by a growing disappointment over the lack of fulfillment—or the lack of contentment in fulfillment ... they feel that they have not reached everything there is to reach.” No text I can cite suggests to me disappointment or a lack of contentment regarding their accomplishments in defeating Huwawa/Humbaba on either Gilgamesh’s or Enkidu’s part. Indeed, if anything, I would suggest the opposite: by redonning his royal robes and rejecting Ishtar at the beginning of Tablet VI, Gilgamesh seems to signal his conviction that the expedition against Huwawa/Humbaba has so cemented his reputation as “the greatest (and most invincible) among kings” (Tablet I, line 27) he need fear nothing, even a formidable goddess. Gilgamesh also seems to me to express only satisfaction and contentment regarding his accomplishments at the end of Tablet VI, when he boasts he is the greatest among Uruk’s warriors (Tablet VI, lines 176–179).

110. Turner, *Drums of Affliction*, p. 38.

111. Turner, “Myth and Symbol,” p. 577b.

112. Although Deuteronomistic law (Deut 14:1) forbade the ancient Israelites to make themselves bald as an act of mourning, the rite, along with the related shaving of the beard, seems to have been known and, for some, considered acceptable. See Lev 10:6, 13:45, 21:5, Jer 7:29, 16:6, 41:5, and Mic 1:16. Isa 15:2 and Jer 48:37 suggest, moreover, that making oneself bald was an act of mourning among the ancient Moabites, and Jer 47:5 suggests the same thing of the Philistines. It may also be that Ugaritic mythology describes the high god of the Canaanite pantheon, El, as shaving off his facial hair when mourning the death of the Canaanite fertility god Baal, although the text (CAT 1.6.5.11–22) is not wholly clear. In addition, note the description of Achilles tearing out his hair as he laments the death of Patroclus (*Iliad* 18.27, 23.46). For other Greek references to this rite, see the examples cited in LSJ, p. 935a, s.v. *keirō*, and Vermeule, *Aspects of Death*, p. 63, and n. 46 on p. 227; for further discussion of the Israelite data, see Olyan, “What Do Shaving Rites Accomplish?” pp. 611–622, especially pp. 616–617. For the stripping off of one’s normal clothes as an ancient Mediterranean mourning rite, see, from Canaanite culture, Ugaritic mythology’s description of El donning sackcloth as he mourns the dead Baal (CAT 1.6.5.11–22); from ancient Israelite culture, Isa 32:11, Jer 6:26, Amos 8:10; from Moabite culture, Jer 48:37; from Phoenician culture, Ezek 27:31; from ancient Greece, *Iliad* 18.23–25, 24.162–165, *Odyssey* 24.316–317.

113. Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 44. See similarly, on Israelite mourning rituals, Olyan, “What Do Shaving Rites Accomplish?” p. 616.

114. Olyan, “What Do Shaving Rites Accomplish?” p. 616; on the seven-day period prescribed for ritual mourning in Mesopotamia, see Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance*, p. 77; Abusch, “Gilgamesh’s Request and Siduri’s Denial, Part II,” p. 8, n. 5.

115. Abusch very provocatively points out that Gilgamesh’s mourning behaviors here are “perverse and topsy-turvy” in another significant way, given that Gilgamesh leaves Enkidu’s body unburied for a week (Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment, col. ii, lines 5–9; in the Standard version, Tablet X, lines 61–65, 135–138, 234–238). As Abusch notes, “Leaving the dead unburied is actually the worst treatment that can be accorded them ... Gilgamesh’s behavior actually resulted in the mistreatment and dishonor of Enkidu. Gilgamesh has committed an offense against Enkidu and deprived him of that which he had been promised: a proper burial.” See Abusch, “Gilgamesh’s Request and Siduri’s Denial, Part II,” p. 10; for the Old Babylonian

Meissner Fragment, see, as in previous chapters, Meissner, *Ein altbabylonisches Fragment*. In terms of the analysis I seek to develop here, I would suggest that Gilgamesh's "perverse and topsy-turvy" failure to bury Enkidu can be read as yet another marker of what Turner calls the "bizarre and terrifying" world of liminality that the narrative seeks to evoke at this point (Turner, "Myth and Symbol," p. 577b).

116. Leach, "Why Did Moses Have a Sister?" p. 37.

117. As noted in chapter 2, nn. 15 and 23, Abusch has argued that Utnapishtim's dwelling place was *not* Gilgamesh's original goal in the Old Babylonian version of the Epic, but that he was only wandering aimlessly until he encountered Siduri. See further, as also in chapter 2, Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part I," pp. 9–14; Abusch, "Mourning the Death of a Friend," pp. 55–59 (cited from the original publication of this essay in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*); also Abusch, "Development and Meaning," p. 615, n. 3, and pp. 617–618.

118. See similarly, on these fearsome beings as typical of the liminal experience of suffering and woe, Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 45.

119. Oppenheim, "Mesopotamian Mythology II," p. 47, suggests that Gilgamesh even "cries out in fear" (*ṣarāḫu*) in the eighth stage of his passage (Tablet IX, line 162), so terrifying is Mashu's utter darkness; see similarly Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 78; Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 139a, s.v. *ṣarāḫu*. Other commentators, however, read *ṣarāḫu*, "to hurry," here; for example, CAD 16 (Š), p. 101a, s.v. *ṣarāḫu* D; Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 98; Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 69; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 74.

120. See, somewhat similarly, Harris, *Gender and Aging*, pp. 35 and 47, who argues, as I do here, that the secret knowledge Gilgamesh receives from Utnapishtim is to be understood according to the model of a rite of passage. In my opinion, however, Harris overstates when she suggests that it is the author to whom the Standard version is commonly attributed, Sîn-leqi-unninnī, who incorporates this motif of the revelation of sacred knowledge in response to his own experience of initiation as an exorcist-priest. See further my discussion above, nn. 62 and 64.

121. As Moran points out ("Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism," p. 20), the Epic's intention in insisting on this point is probably somewhat pragmatic: "If there was only one survivor of the Flood and he lives at the end of the world, how do we know the story at all? Who contacted this survivor? The epic supplies the answer." Yet Moran goes on to say that "there is more to the importance of the Flood story than that," and, while he describes a different significance for the tale than I do here, I certainly agree with his overall assessment.

122. Myerhoff, Camino, and Edith Turner, "Rites of Passage," p. 383b.

123. See Moran, "Gilgamesh," p. 559b; Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," pp. 2329–2330; and Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," p. 243.

124. As noted in chapter 2, n. 38, this translation of the plant's name is Moran's, in "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2335.

125. Utnapishtim is called here by his cognomen Atrahasis, the name that is used of the flood hero regularly in the separate Old Babylonian account of the flood story known as the Epic of Atrahasis. See Lambert and Millard, *Atra-Ḫašis*.

126. Turner, "Icelandic Family Saga," pp. 117–118.

127. Gilgamesh's words to Utnapishtim at the beginning of Tablet XI, "you are like me" (line 4), take on a special resonance in this regard. The "doubling of Utnapishtim and Gilgamesh" is elsewhere explored by Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, p. 114.

128. Astutely pointed out by Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 46.

129. See similarly *ibid.*, p. 45.

130. Turner, "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?" p. 295 (cited from the original publication of this essay in *On the Edge of the Bush*);

see similarly Turner, "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama," pp. 41–42.

131. In addition to my comments that follow, note also Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part II," p. 11, who writes of how Gilgamesh at this point, at least in the Old Babylonian version of the Epic, is in a state of "confusion and disorder," and how "his world has collapsed and *his identity within it*" (emphasis mine).

132. George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 73, similarly has one of the scorpion-men who guard Mount Mashu describe Gilgamesh as "the flesh of the gods" (Tablet IX, line 130). George is dependent here on his own critical edition of the text of Gilgamesh, which, as I noted in the prologue, I was not able to consult before this book went into production. Thus, I cannot be sure of the precise Akkadian text on which George's translation is based. I can note, however, that he places the phrase "flesh of the gods" in brackets in his translation, indicating the phrase is restored in his edition and thus conjectural.

133. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance*, p. 75.

134. Ibid., p. 74, quotes Shemaryahu Talmon: "The Mesopotamians for whom the Arabian desert lay to the West, where the sun sets, identified the wilderness as the area which leads to the netherworld" (Talmon, "Wilderness," p. 946b).

135. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance*, p. 74.

136. Ibid., pp. 74, 76.

137. For example, ibid., pp. 76–77; Hendel, *Epic of the Patriarch*, pp. 116–121; Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 7–8; van Nortwick, *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled*, p. 31.

138. Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 7–8. The passages to which Tigay refers are Tablet I, lines 103–104, Tablet IX, lines 4–5, Tablet X, lines 8–9, 43–44, 117–118, 124–125, 216–217, 223–224.

139. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance*, p. 77.

140. Sasson, "Some Literary Motifs," p. 270.

141. On the location of Mount Mashu in the east, at the place of the rising of the sun, see the Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment, col. iv, line 11, and, in the Standard version, Tablet IX, line 39 (restored; see Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 96; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 71; cf. Thompson, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 50 [Thompson's Tablet IX, col. ii, line 3]; Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 101); this Standard version text is quoted above on p. 114. On the location of the Cedar Forest in the west, in Lebanon, see the Old Babylonian Oriental Institute Fragment, rev. 13 (Bauer, "Ein viertes altbabylonisches Fragment," pp. 254–262), and, in the Standard version, Tablet IV, lines 4, 37 (restored), 76 (restored), 113 (restored), Tablet V, line 117; also the discussion of Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 78. As Tigay notes, this is a change in the Akkadian from the older Sumerian, which seems to locate the Cedar Forest in the east. Tigay hypothesizes that the change is "influenced by the western orientation of the West Semitic dynasties that came to dominate Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian period and the campaigns of certain kings of that period to the west." I suspect, however, that the Akkadian Epic's interest in juxtaposing structurally the journeys to the Cedar Forest and to Mount Mashu may have been as (or even more) important in generating the geographical change. See further my discussions in chapter 5 concerning other changes I believe were introduced in the Akkadian tradition for structural and thematic reasons.

142. Oppenheim, "Mesopotamian Mythology II," pp. 34, 48.

143. Although somewhat dated, the discussion of Oppenheim, *Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 215–217, is still quite useful.

144. Asher-Greve, "The Oldest Female Oneiromancer," pp. 31–32; Harris, "Images of Women," p. 221 (cited from the original publication of this essay in *Lingering Over Words*); see too Harris, *Gender and Aging*, pp. 105–106, 155–156.

145. Asher-Greve, "The Oldest Female Oneiromancer," p. 31.

146. Starr, *Rituals of the Diviner*, p. 7; this reference brought to my attention by Asher-Greve, "The Oldest Female Oneiromancer," p. 31, n. 41.
147. Oppenheim, *Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 221.
148. Note also Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, pp. 53, 59, who suggests that as the prostitute Shamhat was sent into the wilderness to entrap Enkidu, so too is Enkidu "an erotic trap to ensnare Gilgamesh"; like the woman Shamhat, that is, Enkidu is envisioned as a seductress.
149. This reference brought to my attention by Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 56.
150. As I noted in chapter 3, n. 65, I follow here most translators, for example, Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," p. 157; Foster, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 61; Gardner and Maier, *Gilgamesh*, p. 187; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 65; Kovacs, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 70. As Abusch points out, however ("Ishtar's Proposal," pp. 157–158, n. 36), some read *friend* as the subject, rather than object, of the verb "to cover"—for example, Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 93, CAD 8 (K), p. 299a—thus translating (so CAD), "my friend veiled his face like a bride."
151. Harris, *Gender and Aging*, pp. 99–100.
152. See above, p. 72 and n. 67.
153. Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 99.
154. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.
155. Turner, "Process, System, and Symbol," p. 160 (cited from the reprinted edition of this essay found in *On the Edge of the Bush*).
156. Turner, "Metaphors of Anti-Structure," p. 64.
157. Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 97; this quote brought to my attention by Bell, *Ritual*, p. 40.
158. Beye, "Gilgamesh, Lolita, and Huckleberry Finn," p. 40.
159. Myerhoff, Camino, and Edith Turner, "Rites of Passage," p. 382a.

5. The Liminal Hero, Part 2

1. See chapter 3, pp. 59–60 and n. 27, where I cite Kilmer, "Note on an Overlooked Word-Play," p. 128.
2. See chapter 3, pp. 66–67 and n. 51, where I cite Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 126, nn. 9, 10.
3. In addition to my discussion below, see further Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, pp. 162–169, who, notably for our purposes, discusses prostitution in a chapter entitled "Liminal Sexuality."
4. See chapter 3, p. 74 and n. 78, where I cite Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 34; see also, for the translation of the text quoted here, Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, p. 217; also Lambert, "Prostitution," p. 151.
5. See CAD 1, Part II (A), p. 341 b, s.v. *assinnu*; Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation," p. 160, and n. 46 on that page; Lambert, "Prostitution," pp. 147–153; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, pp. 28, 30; and Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, pp. 159–162, who notably discusses the *assinnu* in her chapter entitled "Liminal Sexuality."
6. On the problems of evoking androgyny more universally as a symbol of liminality, see above, chapter 4.
7. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 126, n. 10.
8. See chapter 2, p. 44, and nn. 46–47, where I cite Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," p. 245, and Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 29–30; see also Tigay, "Was There an Integrated Gilgamesh Epic?" p. 217.
9. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

10. As in previous chapters, line numbers for the Epic's Standard version here and throughout are taken from Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

11. These seven times are Tablet III, lines 11, 12, 230, 231, Tablet V, line 131, Tablet VI, line 89, Tablet IX, line 132.

12. Turner, "Betwixt and Between," p. 101 (quoted from the reprinted version of this essay found in Turner, *Forest of Symbols*).

13. See the glossary and concordance compiled by Parpola, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 127a.

14. In addition to the discussion that follows, see my brief comments in chapter 2, p. 17 and n. 16 and, as in that note, Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 24.

15. For the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, see, as in previous chapters, Jastrow and Clay, *Old Babylonian Version of the Gilgamesh Epic*.

16. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 103.

17. As in chapter 2, see further Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2332; Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 76–81.

18. Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 76–81, while agreeing with my understanding here that the change in Shamash's role is significant, offers a somewhat different interpretation of the motivation that underlies the change. He describes three stages. First, he argues that in the Sumerian the role of Shamash (or, more properly, Utu, Shamash's Sumerian name) is simply to aid Gilgamesh in the latter's quest, this because, in the Sumerian, Huwawa's Cedar Mountain is located in the east, not the west (as in the Akkadian), and is moreover identified as the place of the rising of the sun; it is thus a place in which Shamash takes special interest. Then, in the Old Babylonian as Tigay sees it, Shamash is still identified only as a helper to Gilgamesh and not the instigator of the expedition, but since in the Old Babylonian the Cedar Forest is relocated to the west (see chapter 4, n. 141), the reason Shamash is cast into this role as helper is because of his special capacity as protector of travelers and because he stands opposed to all that is "baneful," as is Huwawa/Humbaba. Finally, according to Tigay, in the Standard version, the notion of Shamash as the enemy of the baneful Huwawa/Humbaba suggests to this text's redactors that Shamash must have inspired Gilgamesh to engage in battle against the monster. I have already made clear I would interpret the changes in the role of Shamash differently; here I would just add that I am not as confident as Tigay that Shamash's role as instigator is lacking in the Old Babylonian, given that the text of the Old Babylonian account available to us is only very partially preserved. See similarly Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2332, who writes, "The role assigned to Shamash is an innovation, but probably *not* of the late edition" (emphasis mine).

19. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance*, pp. 78–80; see also Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 50–51; Ray, "The Gilgamesh Epic," p. 312; and Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1," p. 7, n. 30. As I read him, Abusch interprets somewhat differently in "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 2," pp. 12–17, by stressing less that the sort of rejoicing Siduri urges stands generally in structural opposition to mourning and focusing instead more on the excessiveness of Gilgamesh's mourning and the "exaggerated" celebration Siduri suggests "as a way of vigorously re-affirming life."

20. The other major interpreter of Siduri's speech is Abusch: see his "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1," pp. 1–14; Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 2," pp. 3–17; Abusch, "Mourning the Death of a Friend," pp. 53–62 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*); Abusch, "Development and Meaning," pp. 617–618.

21. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance*, p. 79.

22. Two very enigmatic lines in Tablet III of the Standard version (lines 10 and 229) connect Gilgamesh with "wives" (*hīrāti*), but it is not at all clear if these are wives

already in his harem or brides he is to wed on his return from expedition to the domain of Huwawa/Humbaba. Possibly, as Dalley suggests (*Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 127, n. 26), the Epic's intent here, in these ominous passages in which first the elders and then, perhaps, the officers of Uruk caution Gilgamesh about the dangers of his proposed undertaking, is paronomastic, a pun between *hirāti*, "wives," and *hirāti*, "graves." Foster seems to attempt to capture this potential wordplay by translating the elders' and then officers' words as "let him [Gilgamesh] return, to be a grave husband" (*Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 23, 27). For the suggestion that it is Uruk's young warriors or "officers" who speak to Gilgamesh in the very fragmentary second passage, see George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 28, who relies here on his own critical edition of the text, which, as noted in the prologue, I was unable to consult before this volume went to press.

23. See somewhat similarly Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1," p. 4, who argues that the idea that Gilgamesh should take a wife is "one of the most important elements—perhaps the most important element—of Siduri's message" and who further suggests that it is crucial to the message that Gilgamesh and this wife have children (p. 7).

24. Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 101; Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

25. See Moran, "Gilgamesh," p. 559b; Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," pp. 2329–2330; and Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," p. 243.

26. Myerhoff, Camino, and Edith Turner, "Rites of Passage," p. 383a.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 383a.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 382b. On *pašāhu*, "to be at peace," in Tablet I, line 7, see above, chapter 2, n. 41.

29. Above, n. 25.

30. Moran, "Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," p. 2328.

31. As is suggested, for example, by Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1," p. 7; Abusch, "Mourning the Death of a Friend," p. 58 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*).

32. On the Standard version's lack of interest in the institutions of marriage and family, see similarly Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 45, although she appears to contradict herself subsequently, on p. 48, where she argues that Tablet XII, which she feels does stress family and offspring, is to be understood as integral to the Standard version. See further above, chapter 2, n. 42.

33. For other attempts to explain why the Standard version deletes Siduri's speech, see Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1," p. 12 and p. 13, n. 58; George, *Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. xliii.

34. See further Cooper, "Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu," p. 39; cf. also Cooper, "Symmetry and Repetition," p. 508–512.

35. Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 99–100. Although we do not in fact have an Old Babylonian account of Gilgamesh's meeting with Utnapishtim, Tigay presumes that this must have been a part of the Old Babylonian version since reaching Utnapishtim was, after all, the goal of Gilgamesh's journey. See Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 99, and also n. 58 on that page; however, as in chapter 2, nn. 15 and 23, cf. Abusch regarding the question of whether or not the dwelling place of Utnapishtim was the goal of Gilgamesh's journey when he first set off wandering in the Old Babylonian story.

36. Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 99.

37. This interpretation might also help explain why, in its reformulation of the elders' speech that tries to dissuade Gilgamesh from his proposed expedition against Huwawa/Humbaba, the Standard version deviates from its Old Babylonian prototype in adding a line that refers to Gilgamesh's "wives," possibly current, possibly wives to be (cf. the Old Babylonian Yale Tablet, lines 249–271, to the Standard version,

Tablet III, lines 2–10, and also, in the Standard version, the fragmentary Tablet III, lines 228–229; see further above, n. 22). If, as I have suggested here, the Standard version rejects the Old Babylonian's notion that marriage and family are the crucial aspects of human existence that will only become part of Gilgamesh's life in the reaggregated or reintegrated state of a rite of passage, then the Standard version, unlike the Old Babylonian, would feel perfectly free to suggest, in the context of the Huwawa/Humbaba episode, that Gilgamesh may have already been married. See also my comments below in n. 46 on Abusch's analysis of the differing messages of the Old Babylonian and Standard versions.

38. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance*, pp. 79–82; Tigay, *Evolution*, pp. 210–211.

39. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance*, p. 82.

40. Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 212.

41. Ibid.

42. For the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania Tablet, see, as in previous chapters, Langdon, *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Line numbers are given according to the transcription found in Huehnergard, *Grammar*, pp. 475–484.

43. Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 212, n. 57.

44. Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, p. 196.

45. Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 51; see similarly Tigay, *Evolution*, p. 243, and Tigay, "Summary," p. 43.

46. Although our modes of interpretation are significantly different, I do find that the analysis I suggest here regarding the difference between the Old Babylonian and the eleven tablets original to the Standard version complements nicely the understanding proposed by Abusch, "Development and Meaning," passim, but especially pp. 616–620; see also Abusch, "Gilgamesh and the Homeric Epics," passim, but especially pp. 2–3. Abusch argues that Siduri's speech may represent the very essence of the Old Babylonian version's message, that Gilgamesh must learn to be satisfied with "the *normal* pleasures of everyday human life" (p. 617; emphasis mine), whereas in the first eleven tablets of the Standard version there is a greater emphasis on "community, on universal history, and on continuity" and, consequently, a greater focus on Gilgamesh as king and "Gilgamesh's acceptance of *communal* responsibility" (p. 620; emphasis mine). Abusch further suggests that when Tablet XII was added to the older eleven-tablet corpus of the Standard version, the Epic's focus changed yet again, with an "emphasis ... now on Gilgamesh's relationship to the netherworld" and his role as divine judge in that realm (p. 621; see also above, chapter 2, n. 42).

I also find my analysis here complements the observations of Vanstiphout, "Craftsmanship of *Sîn-leqi-unninnī*," p. 66, that the Standard version of the Epic sees children as providing a sort of immortality for "common mortals" but that those of "royal and heroic stature" find immortality through "great works ... left to mankind." I have not been particularly compelled, conversely, by the attempts of some other scholars to differentiate between the thematics of the Old Babylonian and Standard versions: for example, Foster, "Gilgamesh," pp. 21–42; Harris, *Gender and Aging*, pp. 32–49; Jacobsen, "Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," pp. 231–249, especially pp. 246–249. On Harris, see further my discussion in chapter 4, n. 62; on Foster, see the criticisms of Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 34; and on Jacobsen, see further the critique I offer in chapter 2, n. 40.

47. Pointed out by Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 33, footnoting Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 99–105, and Turner, *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage*, pp. 104–105.

48. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 36–37.

49. Ibid., p. 33.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
52. Moran, “Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia,” p. 2328; see similarly Moran, “Gilgamesh,” p. 559a.
53. Harris somewhat similarly comments that Shamhat performs a “mediating role” in the acculturation of Enkidu because she herself, as a prostitute, stands as an intermediate position within Mesopotamian society. See her “Images of Women,” p. 223 (cited from the original version of this essay found in *Lingering Over Words*). On Shamhat as mediator, see also Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, pp. 29–32.
54. Niditch, “Wronged Woman Righted,” p. 147 and n. 13 on that page. These observations of Niditch’s were brought to my attention by Bird, “Harlot as Heroine,” p. 135, n. 17.
55. Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation,” p. 160.
56. Bird, “Harlot as Heroine,” p. 125.
57. *Ibid.*; see similarly Walls’s descriptions of the “prostitute’s ambiguous social status” and of prostitutes as “socially marginal women” in *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 21.
58. Bird, “Harlot as Heroine,” p. 125.
59. Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation,” p. 160, n. 46.
60. For a convenient translation of this text, see Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, pp. 154–162, and the translation by E. A. Speiser in *ANET*, pp. 106b–109a. For comments on the parallels between Ereshkigal’s curses of the *assinnu* sent to her and Enkidu’s curses of Shamhat, see Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 161, nn. 15 and 16; also the comments of Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation,” p. 160, n. 46; Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, pp. 166–167; Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 32.
61. Harris, “Images of Women,” p. 222 and n. 26 on pp. 224–225 (cited from the originally published version of this essay found in *Lingering Over Words*).
62. Abusch, “Gilgamesh’s Request and Siduri’s Denial, Part 1,” pp. 7–8; Abusch’s citation of Moran’s work is to “Ovid’s *blanda voluptas*,” pp. 121–127, especially pp. 126–127. Cf. also Abusch’s comments in “Development and Meaning,” p. 617: “Just as a prostitute, a woman, humanized and acculturated Enkidu at the beginning of this [the Old Babylonian] version, so a tavern-keeper, another woman, humanizes and acculturates Gilgamesh at the end”; similarly, see Mobley, “Wild Man,” p. 222: “Women—first Siduri, the tavern-keeper, and later Utnapishtim’s wife—figure in the wild man Gilgamesh’s return to culture, just as Shamhat was the principal agent of Enkidu’s domestication.”
63. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 132, n. 106.
64. Abusch, “Gilgamesh’s Request and Siduri’s Denial, Part 1,” p. 7, n. 29, and the references listed there.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 5, citing Lambert, “Hymn to the Queen of Nippur,” p. 208.
66. See above, chapter 4, p. 117, and, as there, the comments of Harris, *Gender and Aging*, p. 46.
67. Abusch, “Gilgamesh’s Request and Siduri’s Denial, Part 1,” pp. 11, 12.
68. It is worth noting in this regard how liminally charged Abusch’s interpretation of the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh-Siduri encounter is. As Abusch sees it, Gilgamesh, upon “seeing the face” of the divine alewife (Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment, col. ii, line 12), desires to marry the goddess and, through that marriage, partake in her life of immortality. Abusch argues, though, that although Gilgamesh believes this strategy will bring him eternal life, it is in fact a death wish, a plea to enter a world in which he will “live without living and die without dying” (“Mourning the Death of a Friend,” p. 56 [cited from the original publication of this essay found in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*]). The proposed union, Abusch writes, “would be a

mingling of human and god, life and death," which is to say, to employ the analysis I have adopted in this study, it would be liminal in nature and, moreover, permanently and thus destructively so. What Siduri counsels instead then, in the Old Babylonian Meissner Fragment, col. iii, line 13 ("May your spouse rejoice continuously in your lap"), is a normal marriage with a human spouse. See Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1," passim; Abusch, "Mourning the Death of a Friend," pp. 55–59 (cited again from the publication of this essay found in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*).

69. Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1," p. 9.

70. Harris, "Images of Women," p. 222 (cited from the originally published version of this essay found in *Lingering Over Words*).

71. Lambert, "Hymn to the Queen of Nippur," p. 208.

72. Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox," pp. 263, 265 (cited from the originally published version of this essay found in *HR 30*). See further, on Ishtar's contradictory nature, Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," p. 159, who speaks of Ishtar both as a goddess of fertility and life but also of death; Vanstiphout, "Inanna/Ishtar as a Figure of Controversy," pp. 225–238.

73. Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox," p. 264 (cited from the originally published version of this essay found in *HR 30*); see also Harris, "Images of Women," pp. 226–227 (cited from the originally published version of this essay found in *Lingering Over Words*).

74. See, among others, Moran, "Epic of Gilgamesh: A Document of Ancient Humanism," p. 20.

75. Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox," p. 272 (cited from the originally published version of this essay found in *HR 30*); Harris, "Images of Women," pp. 227–228 (cited from the originally published version of this essay found in *Lingering Over Words*). See also, on the very masculine nature of Ishtar's proposition of Gilgamesh, Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 22.

76. Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox," p. 271 (cited from the originally published version of this essay found in *HR 30*); on Ishtar as the patron of prostitutes, see further Lambert, "Prostitution," pp. 135–136.

77. See chapter 2, p. 41 and n. 34, and, as there, Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," pp. 180–187, and Abusch, "Development and Meaning," p. 615, n. 3, and p. 618.

78. See chapter 4, pp. 111–112.

79. Turner, *Drums of Affliction*, p. 38.

80. Vanstiphout, "Craftsmanship of *Sîn-leqi-unninnī*," passim, also reads the Tablet VI material as pivotal in terms of the Epic's structure, although his overall understanding of its significance differs from mine. See further n. 109 in chapter 4.

81. Abusch, "Development and Meaning," p. 621.

82. Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," p. 152.

83. The purpose of the sacred marriage ritual is debated. An older reconstruction sees it as a ritual in which the king, representing the young fertility god Dumuzi (Akkadian Tammuz), has intercourse with a priestess, representing the fertility goddess Inanna (the Sumerian name of Ishtar), in order to emulate these two deities' mythological coupling and thus stimulate both human and agricultural fecundity within the realm. More recently, Cooper has argued that the ritual has more to do with securing divine legitimization of the king's rule and also with regulating relations between humans and the divine and reaffirming a king's and people's obligations to the gods. See Cooper, "Sacred Marriage," pp. 89–92; also Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 43.

84. Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," p. 158.

85. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

86. As in n. 68 above, it is worth noting how liminally charged Abusch's

interpretation of Ishtar's marriage proposal is, as Abusch's suggestion that "Ishtar is attainment, but also attenuation—to love her is to surrender one's identity" (Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," p. 173) is similar to his argument that a potential union between Siduri and Gilgamesh, although it might appear to offer life (indeed, eternal life), is in truth a death wish for Gilgamesh. Consistent with this liminally charged interpretation of Ishtar's proposition, Abusch suggests an ambiguous character to Gilgamesh's acts of clothing and cleansing in Tablet VI, lines 1–5, just prior to the hero's encounter with Ishtar: these could be taken as either life-affirming acts or the washing and ceremonial dressing of the body as it is prepared for burial (Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," p. 161). He also notes more generally the ambiguous overlap many scholars have observed between marriage and funerary rites (Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," pp. 157–158; in addition to the reference to van Gennep that Abusch cites, see Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual Play*, p. 234, and p. 317, n. 1, and the references listed there).

87. Further aspects of the relationship between the Shamhat and Ishtar episodes in the Epic of Gilgamesh are provocatively explored by Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, pp. 36–40. See also, the comments of Foster, "Gilgamesh," p. 36.

88. Note the somewhat similar comments of Harris, "Images of Women," p. 226 (cited from the originally published version of this essay found in *Lingering Over Words*); also Foster, "Humor and Wit," p. 2468. This latter reference brought to my attention by Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 82, n. 15.

6. Introducing David

1. The card was produced by Robert Lentz and published in 1995 by Bay Area Dignity.

2. The terminology that should be used to describe this scholarly position is contested. The arguments for describing it as revisionist are best presented by Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* pp. 47–48, n. 47, and p. 255, n. 55, who points out that *revisionist* is a term that the adherents of this position have sometimes used of themselves (see, for example, Lemche and Thompson, “Did Biran Kill David?” p. 17; Lemche, *Israelites in History and Tradition*, p. 157). Dever also suggests that the term need not necessarily have pejorative connotations, although according to Nadav Na’aman, “Cow Town or Royal Capital?” p. 67, n. 2, Philip R. Davies, one of the proponents of this position, disagrees. Certainly, the other terminology commonly used to describe the adherents of this scholarly position, *minimalist*, seems in intent derogatory and disparaging and should be avoided.

3. See, for example, Dever’s *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* p. 4.

4. Lemche and Thompson, “Did Biran Kill David?” p. 18; this quote brought to my attention by Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* p. 10.

5. Thompson, as quoted in Shanks, “Face to Face,” p. 28.

6. Of course, my short summary here is, by necessity, a vast oversimplification of the revisionists’ views and also suffers from its attempt to collapse the nuances of various revisionist positions into a synthetic whole. For a fuller presentation, the following works are crucial: Davies, *In Search of “Ancient Israel”*; Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?*; Davies, “Whose History? Whose Israel? Whose Bible?”; Lemche, “Early Israel Revisited”; Lemche, *Israelites in History and Tradition*; Lemche, *Prelude to Israel’s Past*; Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People*; Thompson, “A Neo-Albrightian School”; Thompson, “Historiography of Ancient Palestine”; Thompson, “Defining History and Ethnicity”; Thompson, *The Mythic Past*; Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel*.

7. Lemche, *Israelites in History and Tradition*, p. 166; this quote brought to my attention by Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* p. 48.

8. Thompson, “A Neo-Albrightian School,” p. 697.

9. Thompson, *The Mythic Past*, p. 7; this quote brought to my attention by Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* p. 49.

10. Lemche and Thompson, “Did Biran Kill David?” p. 16.

11. Lemche, as quoted in Shanks, “Face to Face,” p. 40.

12. Lemche and Thompson, “Did Biran Kill David?” p. 18.

13. Thompson, as quoted in Shanks, “Face to Face,” p. 34.

14. Lemche and Thompson, “Did Biran Kill David?” p. 19; this quote brought to my attention by Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* p. 126.

15. For a good survey of the revisionists’ position and the response of their critics, see Shanks, “Face to Face”; Shanks, “The Biblical Minimalists.” For more detailed criticism, see Dever, “Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up?” Parts 1 and 2; Dever, “Revisionist Israel Revisited”; Dever, “Philology, Theology, and Archaeology”; Dever, “Archaeology and the ‘Age of Solomon’”; Dever, “Archaeology, Ideology, and the Quest for ‘Ancient’ or ‘Biblical’ Israel”; Dever, “Histories and Nonhistories of Ancient Israel”; Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* passim, but especially chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 1–52); Halpern, “Erasing History”; Halpern, “The Construction of the Davidic State”; Halpern, *David’s Secret Demons*, passim, but especially chapters 3 and 4 (pp. 57–103); Japhet, “In Search of Ancient Israel”; Provan, “Ideologies, Literary and Critical.”

16. The stele fragments were originally published by Biran and Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," and Biran and Naveh, "The Tel Dan Inscription." A full bibliography of the discussions that ensued (through 1997) can be found in Kitchen, "A Possible Mention of David," pp. 42–44. Post-1997 materials that should be noted include: Biran, "Biblical Dan and the House of David Inscription," and Lemaire, "The Tel Dan Stele."

17. The date of the stele has been debated in the literature but nevertheless seems firm; see Kitchen, "A Possible Mention of David," pp. 34–35.

18. Lemche, as quoted in Shanks, "Face to Face," pp. 36–38. Frederick H. Cryer also raises the possibility of forgery, although he ultimately rejects it; see Cryer's "On the Recently Discovered 'House of David' Inscription," pp. 14–15, and his "Of Epistemology, Northwest-Semitic Epigraphy and Irony," p. 6.

19. Ben Zvi, "On the Reading *bytdwd*"; Cryer, "On the Recently Discovered 'House of David' Inscription," p. 17 and n. 34 on that page; Cryer, "A 'BETDAWD' Miscellany," pp. 52, 54; Davies, "*Bytdwd and Swkt Dwyd*," pp. 23–24; Davies, "'House of David' Built on Sand," pp. 54–55; Lemche and Thompson, "Did Biran Kill David?"; Thompson, "'House of David.'"

20. For example, Dever, as quoted in Shanks, "Face to Face," pp. 36–37; Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* p. 30.

21. As most forcefully argued by Kitchen, "A Possible Mention of David," pp. 29–35.

22. Lemaire, "'House of David' Restored in Moabite Inscription." Note also Kitchen, "A Possible Mention of David," pp. 29–44.

23. McKenzie, *King David*, p. 19.

24. Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, pp. 318, 428.

25. Tarler and Cahill, "David, City of"; Kenyon, *Digging Up Jerusalem*, pp. 114–115; this latter reference brought to my attention by Na'aman, "Cow Town or Royal Capital?" p. 67, n. 5. See further, on Kenyon's excavations, Steiner, "It's Not There," p. 29.

26. Shiloh, *Excavations at the City of David I*, p. 27, as cited by Na'aman, "Cow Town or Royal Capital?" p. 67, n. 6; see also Steiner, "It's Not There," p. 29, and cf. Tarler and Cahill, "Excavations Directed by Yigael Shiloh," p. 34.

27. Thompson, as quoted in Shanks, "Face to Face," p. 35.

28. It is Dever, in *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* p. 127, who has astutely pointed out that Thompson's source for his figure of circa two thousand is Finkelstein's "Archaeology of the United Monarchy," p. 184, and that Thompson has misinterpreted Finkelstein with regard to the geographical region covered in Finkelstein's estimate.

29. Meyers, "Kinship and Kingship," pp. 240–241.

30. Dever, in *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* p. 127 and the references there.

31. The Hellenistic chronology is the one typically subscribed to by Lemche and Thompson (although on Thompson, see Dever, "Histories and Nonhistories of Ancient Israel," p. 90), whereas a Persian date is advocated by Davies. See Thompson, "A Neo-Albrightian School," p. 686, n. 8.

32. See Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, pp. 274–289, especially pp. 284, 287; Friedman, *The Exile and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 1–26; Nelson, *Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History*, passim, but especially pp. 13–28, 119–128.

33. Dever, "What Did the Biblical Writers Know?" passim; see also the voluminous collection of materials cited in support of this point by Halpern in *David's Secret Demons*, pp. 58–72.

34. Dever, "What Did the Biblical Writers Know?" p. 246.

35. Ibid.

36. For discussion, see, most recently, Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, pp. 7–8; McKenzie, *King David*, pp. 75–76; Steussy, *David*, pp. 10–11.
37. The evidence that supports this claim has been exhaustively surveyed by Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, pp. 107–226. A good summary discussion is available in Meyers, “Kinship and Kingship,” pp. 247–251.
38. Cf., however, Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* p. 127.
39. As in n. 24 above, see Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, pp. 317–320, 428.
40. Meyers, “Kinship and Kingship,” pp. 243–244; see also the discussion of Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, pp. 107–226.
41. Meyers, “Kinship and Kingship,” pp. 236, 257–259, 263.
42. The key archaeological evidence that demonstrates the emergence of a state under Solomon is the presence of virtually identical monumental entry gates in the city walls of Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer. Most scholars date these gateways to the mid-tenth century BCE and argue that their massive size and their standardized plan are evidence of a powerful royal authority, in control of the financial resources necessary to engage in large-scale building projects and also able to exert enough administrative control to establish its preferred design in provincial capitals across Israelite territory. Such a reconstruction, moreover, corresponds nicely with the description in 1 Kgs 9:15 of Solomon's building activities at the three sites in question. Finkelstein, however, has challenged the tenth-century BCE date of the Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer remains and thus challenged the notion that there is a full-fledged Israelite state in existence at that time. See his “Date of the Settlement of the Philistines in Canaan,” pp. 213–239; Finkelstein, “The Archaeology of the United Monarchy”; Finkelstein, “State Formation in Israel and Judah”; Finkelstein, “Hazor and the North in the Iron Age”; also Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, pp. 433–450; Ussishkin, “The ‘Solomonic’ City Gate at Megiddo.”
43. Jasper, “Literary Readings of the Bible,” p. 27.
44. Bowman, “Narrative Criticism,” p. 17.
45. Gunn, “Narrative Criticism,” p. 201.
46. King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, p. 7.

7. David and Jonathan

1. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, p. 203; Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 67, quoting Comstock, “Love, Power and Competition,” p. 23; Schroer and Staubli, “Saul, David and Jonathan,” p. 35.
2. As I discussed in chapter 1, the phrase “before sexuality” is taken from Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin, eds., *Before Sexuality*.
3. There has been some debate in the literature over the parameters of David's lament. Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel*, p. 76, emends v 18 so that it reads as the introductory couplet to the lament; he is followed by Holladay, “Form and Word-Play in David's Lament,” pp. 162–168. As I do here, however, most commentators take the lament as beginning with v 19: so, for example, O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure*, p. 233, following Freedman, “The Refrain in David's Lament.” For further discussion, see Edelman, “The Authenticity of 2 Sam 1, 26”; McCarter, *II Samuel*, pp. 67–68.
4. The scribal tradition has confused the Benjaminite villages Gibeah (*gib'â*) and Geba (*geba*) throughout 1 Samuel 13–14; for discussion, see McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 225; less completely, Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, pp. 101–102.
5. But cf. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, p. 104, n. a.
6. Only later still is it indicated that Jonathan is Saul's oldest son, in 1 Sam 14:49 (assuming, that is, that the biblical convention of listing sons in order of their age

holds in this verse and in the four other verses in the Bible in which Saul's sons are named [1 Sam 31:2 = 1 Chr 10:2, 1 Chr 8:33, 9:39]). The tradition is otherwise confused about the names and even the number of Saul's sons; see McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 256.

7. It has been suggested that much of the material found in 1 Samuel 13–14 (13:2–7a, 15b–23, 14:1–46) stems from a larger complex of traditions that catalogued Israel's victories under Saul in the wars against the Philistines and that focused especially on the heroism of Saul's son Jonathan. In the redactional history of Samuel, only the story of Jonathan's exploits at Gibeah/Geba and Michmash was included because its account of Saul's unfortunate oath served the editor's purpose of portraying Saul's leadership as irredeemably flawed. As P. Kyle McCarter writes, "The old story in cc 13–14 has survived because it illustrates the failings of Saul," even though, "just as surely ... it demonstrates the heroism of his son" (McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 251); see similarly Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel*, pp. 104, 119. For a methodologically different attempt to deal with the anomalies of 1 Samuel 13–14 (one that works more with the canonical form of the text as it has come down to us, rather than with its different redactional strata), see Jobling, "Saul's Fall and Jonathan's Rise."

8. On the Saul story as tragedy, see Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 16–44, and the references cited there; also Jobling, "Saul's Fall and Jonathan's Rise," especially p. 368.

9. According to 1 Chr 2:13–15, David is the youngest of Jesse's seven sons; 1 Sam 16:10 assumes there are seven sons other than David (see also 1 Sam 17:12). For discussion, see, most recently and thoroughly, McKenzie, *King David*, pp. 52–53.

10. For discussion of the different textual strata within 1 Samuel, see Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 135; Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, pp. 240–244; and, most fully, McCarter, *I Samuel*, pp. 20–23, 27–30, 278, 282.

11. Although 1 Sam 17:12–31 follows 1 Sam 16:1–13 in theme, it and its related materials (1 Sam 17:41, 48b, 50, 55–58, 18:1–5, 10–11, 17–19, 29b–30) were originally an independent narrative and one that seemingly joined the biblical tradition very late, given that it is not reflected in the Greek Codex Vaticanus, considered by scholars to present the most reliable witness to the original translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in the fourth century BCE. See, preeminently, Tov, "The Composition of 1 Samuel 16–18"; also Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 148; Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, pp. 146–147; McCarter, *I Samuel*, pp. 306–307; McKenzie, *King David*, pp. 70–73, 77–83. But cf. (among others) Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, pp. 6–7; Rofé, "The Battle of David and Goliath," pp. 119–123.

12. Moran, "Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God," p. 77.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

16. On 2 Sam 5:11, see Bright, *History of Israel*, p. 204; also Thompson, "Significance of the Verb *Love*," p. 334.

17. Moran, "Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God," p. 82, n. 33; see also Fishbane, "Treaty Background of Amos 1 11," p. 314.

18. Thompson, "Significance of the Verb *Love*," p. 335.

19. Ackroyd, "The Verb *Love*," p. 213.

20. Sakenfeld, "Loyalty and Love," p. 200 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *Michigan Quarterly Review*). See also Sakenfeld, "Love (OT)," p. 376a.

21. Edelman, "The Authenticity of 2 Sam 1, 26," p. 66.

22. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 305.

23. Although Sakenfeld, as I read her, equivocates on this issue; see below n. 26

and also my comments on p. 191.

24. Thompson, "Significance of the Verb *Love*," p. 336.

25. Ackroyd, "The Verb *Love*," p. 214; Ackroyd also argues that the verb *niqšar*, "to be bound," in 1 Sam 18:1 has political overtones as well as nonpolitical connotations suggesting personal affection.

26. Sakenfeld, "Loyalty and Love," p. 200 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *Michigan Quarterly Review*). On p. 201 of this article, however, Sakenfeld seems to downplay the significance of David's and Jonathan's "personal relationship" and "personal affection" by denying any "possibility of a homosexual relationship between David and Jonathan" in 1 Samuel. "The present writer," she states, "interprets the themes of love, loyalty, and covenant in a quite different direction."

27. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 305.

28. Schroer and Staubli, "Saul, David and Jonathan," p. 28.

29. As Athalya Brenner points out (in *The Intercourse of Knowledge*, p. 175), the premier demonstrations of this point are by Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, pp. 31–60, and Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Problem of the Body," pp. 17–46.

30. Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings*, pp. 149, 169.

31. On the connection between 1 Sam 17:25 and 18:17, see, especially, Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 152; Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, p. 160.

32. See chapter 3, p. 72 and n. 68.

33. Cf., however, Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, p. 146, who offer a far more cynical reading of David's motivations and actions.

34. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, p. 206.

35. As discussed in chapter 3, Gilgamesh, in the Standard version of the Gilgamesh Epic, envisions *both* the axe and the meteor that symbolize Enkidu in his dreams as being "like a wife" to him; in the Old Babylonian version, this motif is found in the axe dream only.

36. Above, n. 11.

37. Taken, with adaptations, from Tov, "The Composition of 1 Samuel 16–18," p. 119.

38. This theme of David's extraordinary military prowess—superior, indeed, to that of Saul—is first introduced in the primary narrative tradition in 1 Sam 18:6–9 and is reevoked in 1 Sam 21:11 and 29:5.

39. Botterweck, "*hāpēs*," p. 94.

40. It is difficult to come to terms with Shechem's professions of love in Genesis 34, given that they follow immediately on a description of Shechem's rape of Dinah. I have surveyed various scholarly opinions on this issue and offered my own in Ackerman, "The Personal Is Political," pp. 455–457.

41. Botterweck, "*hāpēs*," pp. 95–96.

42. Ibid., p. 95; Schroer and Staubli, "Saul, David and Jonathan," p. 28.

43. The intervening 1 Sam 18:29b–30, recall, is a part of the materials found in 1 Samuel 17–18's variant strand.

44. In her 1983 article "Loyalty and Love," Sakenfeld, following Moran, suggests that Michal's love for David is the love of covenant loyalty and fidelity rather than the love of personal affection. This is because of Sakenfeld's assumption that "Michal loved David before she even met him personally" (p. 200). But there is little textual basis to support this reading, and in her 1992 entry "Love (OT)," in *ABD* 4, Sakenfeld, correctly in my opinion, classifies the love of Michal for David as "the attraction of one person to another of the opposite sex" (p. 376a). Certainly, all other commentators of whom I am aware understand Michal's love in emotional terms.

45. Clines, "The Story of Michal," p. 131.

46. My comments here focus on ways in which the same sorts of arguably

eroticized and even sexualized language and imagery are used in 1 Samuel's depictions of Michal and Jonathan; for more general descriptions of these two characters' parallel natures, see Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, pp. 24–25; Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, p. 206; Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 71–95; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 51–60.

47. On Jonathan as Saul's oldest son, see above, n. 6.

48. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 82; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 23.

49. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 82; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 23; see similarly Clines, "The Story of Michal," p. 132.

50. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 53; similarly, Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 83.

51. One might argue that Jonathan is depicted in the narrative as turning his back on a marital relationship as well, in favor of his relationship with David, although the evidence that would support this interpretation is somewhat sparse. We do know that Jonathan was understood by the biblical writers to have been married, given that he is identified in 2 Sam 4:4, 9:6 and 1 Chr 8:34, 9:40 as the father of a son, called Mephibosheth (in 2 Samuel) or Merib-baal (in 1 Chronicles; on these variant names, see below in chapter 8, n. 62). We also know that, according to 2 Sam 4:4, Jonathan's son is said to have been five years of age when his father was killed in battle. What we do not know, because the book of 1 Samuel includes very few chronological markers in its narrative (and also because the few it does include are textually confused; see, for example, 1 Sam 13:1), is the amount of time that the tradition ascribes to the period between David's coming to Saul's court and Jonathan's death. It seems plausible, however, to assume that the narrative understood Jonathan to be married to and begetting children with the mother of Mephibosheth/Merib-baal at the time when David and Jonathan first began to interact. Yet there is no mention at all of Jonathan's wife in the Samuel materials. Perhaps we should just ascribe this silence to the Bible's general disregard for its women characters, or perhaps to the Samuel tradition's generally erratic presentation of the major events of Jonathan's life (above, n. 7). However, we can perhaps also speculate that, even as the narrative admits Jonathan was married, it obscures traditions regarding Jonathan's wife in order to suggest that, in Jonathan's life, as in David's, once a relationship with a heroic counterpart is established, that relationship somehow overshadows and even replaces the hero's relationship with a woman.

52. As in n. 46 above, my focus here is on parallels of a potentially eroticized and sexualized nature; more general discussions of Jonathan's and Michal's parallel natures can be found in the references cited there.

53. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, p. 203.

54. See similarly Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 163, who describes the covenant between David and Jonathan as "analogous to a marriage agreement."

55. See further McCarter, *1 Samuel*, p. 337.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

57. Hillers, "Bow of Aqhat," p. 73; see also Hoffner, "Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity," pp. 329–331; Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, pp. 189–190, 201–202.

58. McCarter, *1 Samuel*, p. 341.

59. See further above, chapter 3.

60. Reading 'argāb, "mound," for the Masoretic *negeb*, "south," with the LXX.

61. Further on this point see Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, pp. 24–25, but cf. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 80, and p. 169, n. 30.

62. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 53; similarly, Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 83; Clines, "The Story of Michal," p. 133.

63. Political considerations also motivate David much later in the narrative, in 2

Sam 3:13–15, when, as part of his efforts to secure Israel's throne, he demands that Michal be returned to him: to lay claim Michal is, obviously, to assert a claim to her father's kingdom. Adele Berlin further suggests that the text's notice that Michal never had any children (2 Sam 6:23) provides "a hint that the husband who never loved her now stopped having marital relations with her" (*Poetics and Interpretation*, p. 25). See also on 2 Sam 6:23, and more generally on the subject of Michal's unrequited affections and David's political motivations, Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 73; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 22–27, 54; McKenzie, *King David*, p. 87.

64. Jobling, "Jonathan: A Structural Study," p. 17; cf. the far more sweeping claims of Morgenstern, "David and Jonathan," pp. 322–325.

65. Cf., however, as in n. 33 above, the more cynical interpretation of David's actions offered by Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, p. 150.

66. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 330. Cf., however, Jobling, "Jonathan: A Structural Study," p. 18, who labels 1 Sam 19:19–24 a "satirical recapitulation" of the earlier "Saul among the prophets" story. Jobling offers a different interpretation in *1 Samuel*, pp. 120–121.

67. See similarly Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, p. 206.

68. Jobling, "Jonathan: A Structural Study," pp. 21–22, reads this scene as indicating that the narrative has so come to presume a total identification between David and Jonathan that Saul's anger at Jonathan, which extends even to the point of Saul's seeking to kill his son, is really anger directed against David: "an act directed at one is an act directed at the other." See also on the identification between David and Jonathan, Jobling, *1 Samuel*, pp. 95–96; Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 75, 79; Leach, *Genesis as Myth*, p. 67. But cf. Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 161, where he suggests that the text "fails to explain the extremity of his [Saul's] fury against Jonathan" and goes on to suggest, as I will discuss below, that "irrational homophobia" may be the cause.

69. The Masoretic text reads *ben-na'awat hammardût*, taking *na'awat* as a Niphal participle of *wh*, "to be bent, twisted." Commentators often emend to *ben-na'arat hammardût*, "a rebellious young woman." See BDB, p. 597b, s.v. *mardût*, and p. 730b, s.v. *wh* I.

70. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 343.

71. See similarly Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, p. 175.

72. Schroer and Staubli, "Saul, David and Jonathan," p. 28.

73. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 55. Nissinen ultimately concludes, however, that the text does not mean to imply David and Jonathan had a physically intimate relationship. See further below.

74. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 339, follows the LXX in reading *hbr 'th*, "to be in league with," versus the Masoretic *bhr*, "to choose."

75. The Masoretic tradition reads that Jonathan encouraged David through "God," but the reading "Yahweh," reflected in both the Septuagint and at Qumran (in 4QSamb), is preferable.

76. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 374.

77. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 80; on 1 Sam 18:1–4 as symbolic abdication, see similarly (with further references), Jobling, "Jonathan: A Structural Study," p. 20; Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 96; McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 305; also Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 147. But cf. Comstock, "Love, Power and Competition," pp. 13, 20.

78. Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 164.

79. On the parameters of the lament's text, and the question of whether v 18 should be included, see above, n. 3.

80. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, p. 205.

81. Schroer and Staubli, "Saul, David, and Jonathan," p. 35; see also Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1," p. 4.

82. I follow here the prosody marked in the Masoretic text, although most modern translations divide differently and read, "In their life and in their death, they were not parted" or some variation thereupon (so, for example, the RSV, the NRSV, the NJPS, the REB, and the NEB). Other modern scholars, concerned by the lack of a verb associated with "in their life" that stands parallel to the verb "separated" (*niprād*) associated with "in their death," emend to read something like "They were not parted in life / and in death they were not separated" (so McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 72) or "In their lives they were joined / And in their death they were not divided" (so Gevitz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel*, p. 92). For arguments against such emendation, see Holladay, "Form and Word-Play in David's Lament," pp. 179–180.

83. The Masoretic text reads *npl'th* instead of the expected *npl'h*. In their important *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, originally published in 1950, Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman suggest that an *aleph* has been lost by haplography, yielding an original reading of *npl' t*, "wonderful" or "surpassing wast thou"; the next colon, in their understanding, would then read, "To love thee was for me / Better than the love of women" (Cross and Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, pp. 17–18). Freedman basically reiterates this suggestion in his 1972 article, "The Refrain in David's Lament," pp. 265, 271 (cited from the reprinted edition of this article found in *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy*). McCarter, however, suggests that the seemingly anomalous *npl'th* may not be such an anomaly after all but may represent the way in which verbs ending in a final *aleph* can follow the vocalization pattern of final-*he* verbs. See McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 73. For yet another explanation of *npl'th*, see Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, p. 236, n. d.

84. Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, pp. 9–10; Fishbane, "Treaty Background of Amos 1 11," pp. 314–315; Olyan, "Surpassing the Love of Women."

85. Olyan, "Surpassing the Love of Women."

86. Sakenfeld, "Loyalty and Love," p. 201 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *Michigan Quarterly Review*); see further my comments in nn. 23 and 26 above.

87. Edelman's position is the closest to Sakenfeld's, as she argues that v 26 is secondary to David's lament, added by an editor "to give the narrative theme of the covenant between David and Jonathan an air of authenticity" (Edelman, "The Authenticity of 2 Sam 1, 26," p. 74).

88. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 77.

89. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 53 and n. 22 on that page; see similarly Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 73 and 93, and Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 165, who writes of the lament, "there are ... no words (or at best ambiguous ones) of David's love for Jonathan. David sings still of Jonathan's love for *him*." Yet how to take this statement of Jobling's in relation to the comment he makes regarding 2 Sam 1:26 found on p. 161 of *1 Samuel*—"Here is a man telling of his love for another man, comparing it with heterosexual love, and saying it is better"—is completely unclear to me.

90. Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings*, p. 169; Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, p. 297.

91. Cross and Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, p. 17; see similarly Freedman, "The Refrain in David's Lament Over Saul and Jonathan," p. 265 (cited from the reprinted edition of this article found in *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy*).

92. In addition to the materials I have catalogued, see Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, pp. 24–25, who argues that "characteristics ... usually perceived as feminine are linked with Jonathan"; also Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, pp. 150–151; finally, and most provocatively, Holladay, "Form and Word-Play in David's Lament," p. 184, who argues that 2 Sam 1:26 should be read and

interpreted in conjunction with 2 Sam 1:24, as 1:24 begins with women in the same way 1:26 ends with them (the first line of 2 Sam 1:24 reads, “O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul”). Yet, as Holladay also points out, there is still a “vast difference” between the two verses: “in v. 24, the daughters of Israel are addressed and told to weep over Saul, while here [in v 26] it is Jonathan himself who is addressed.” Holladay does not go on to draw the implication he might, but our interests can lead us to suggest that one effect of the parallels Holladay cites is to render Jonathan, like the daughters of Israel, as female.

93. As I discussed in chapter 1, the premier presentations of this sort of analysis are those of Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation”; Olyan, “And with a Male”; Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19”; Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, pp. 69–84.

94. As in n. 93, see Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation”; Olyan, “And with a Male”; Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19”; Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, pp. 69–84.

95. Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19,” p. 96; Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, p. 76.

96. As pointed out by Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation,” p. 148.

97. Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19,” p. 97; see similarly Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, p. 76.

98. As in chapter 1, I rely on Olyan, “And with a Male,” for this translation.

99. Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19,” p. 98; see similarly Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, p. 78.

100. Stone, “Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19,” p. 98; see similarly Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, p. 78.

101. Olyan, “And with a Male,” pp. 186–187.

102. McKenzie, *King David*, p. 85.

103. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 83.

104. Bird, “The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation,” p. 146, n. 6.

105. Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 56.

106. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

107. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 83.

108. See my critique of Halperin’s analysis above in chapter 3, and in addition, as there, Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, p. 90, n. 80. Another very brief critique of the essay on heroic friendship in which Halperin discusses the Gilgamesh and Samuel materials is offered by Nussbaum, “Bondage and Freedom of Eros,” p. 573, who labels it “rather thin.”

109. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 73; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 52.

110. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 53, quoting Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, pp. 204–206.

111. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, p. 202.

8. Liminality and Beyond

1. On the relation of 1 Sam 16:1–13 and 1 Sam 17:12–31, 41, 48b, 50, see n. 11 in chapter 7.

2. As in chapter 7, n. 11, see, on the different textual strata within 1 Samuel 16–18, Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 135; Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, pp. 240–244; McCarter, *I Samuel*, pp. 20–23, 27–30, 278, 282; McKenzie, *King David*, pp. 70–73, 77–83; and, most fully, Tov, “The Composition of 1 Samuel 16–18.”

3. For David as a “nobleman” in 1 Sam 16:18, see McKenzie, *King David*, pp. 57–

59, although note that McKenzie reads the seeming disjunction between the descriptions of David as a shepherd and a noble differently than I do.

4. Steussy, *David*, p. 4.

5. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

6. On the role of women as singers of victory songs in Israelite tradition, see especially Poethig, *The Victory Song Tradition*; also Meyers, "Of Drums and Damsels," and Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses?* pp. 11–40, although I would note my disagreement with many of the specifics of Burns's interpretation, especially her differentiation of cultic versus secular victory songs.

7. Above, p. 99, 114.

8. The Masoretic text reads *me'arat 'adullām*, "the cave of Adullam," and this is reflected also in the versions, but McCarter, following a suggestion originally made by Julius Wellhausen, prefers to read *mēšudat 'adullām*, "the stronghold of Adullam," as is suggested by subsequent references to "the stronghold" in 21:4–5. See McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 355.

9. The location of Mizpeh in Moab is unknown; see, most recently, Arnold, "Mizpah," p. 880b. The location of the "Forest of Hereth" is likewise unknown; see Hamilton, "Hereth," p. 147b.

10. Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 97; see similarly Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, p. 172.

11. Reading *l' y'sh* with the *Qēre'* for the *Kētib lw 'sh*.

12. Jobling, "Jonathan: A Structural Study," p. 21; Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 97.

13. Jobling, "Jonathan: A Structural Study," p. 21; Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 97.

14. Jobling, "Jonathan: A Structural Study," p. 22.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 21; Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 97; see also McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 342.

McCarter explains these seeming contradictions in 1 Sam 20:1–21:1 (English 20:1–42) by suggesting 1 Sam 20:11–17 represents a secondary addition to the 1 Samuel 20 narrative, made by some redactor who particularly wanted to foreshadow 2 Samuel 9, in which David, now king, takes Jonathan's lame son Merib-baal/Mephibosheth into his house and otherwise treats him with kindness because of the commitment he made to Jonathan while Jonathan was still alive. As the methodological approach I have taken in both this and the last chapter suggests, I am generally not at all opposed to this sort of analysis that identifies and finds an explanatory power in isolating various sources and redactive levels in the text. Still, I think that here, McCarter too readily excises 1 Sam 20:11–17, which at least in its theme of Jonathan's obeisance to David reads as consistent with parts of the narrative that McCarter would not dismiss as secondary (especially 1 Sam 18:4).

16. Above, p. 109–110.

17. On at least two of the occasions in which Yahweh responds to David's ritual inquiries (1 Sam 23:10–11, 12), God responds by means of a divination rite conducted for David by Abiathar, a priest who has taken refuge with David after fleeing from the shrine at Nob (which Saul had destroyed because the clergy there gave David sanctuary early on in his flight from the king's court). The presence of Abiathar in David's entourage is significant for our analysis, as Abiathar serves as a visible symbol of the way in which contact with the divine is manifest during this arguably liminal period in David's life story.

18. Leach, "Why Did Moses Have a Sister?" p. 37.

19. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 388.

20. Above, p. 108.

21. McCarter, *I Samuel*, pp. 17, 386–387.

22. Notably, the cave in which David is described as encountering Saul in 1 Sam 24:2–23 (English 24:1–22) is, according to Turner, a typical liminal symbol, embodying liminality's ambiguity by representing both "birth and death, womb and tomb." See Turner, "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and

Drama?" p. 295 (cited from the original publication of this essay found in *On the Edge of the Bush*). See similarly Turner, "Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama," pp. 41–42.

23. McKenzie, *King David*, p. 95.

24. Turner, "Process, System, and Symbol," p. 160 (cited from the reprinted edition of this essay found in *On the Edge of the Bush*).

25. Turner, "Metaphors of Anti-Structure," p. 64.

26. Turner, "Process, System, and Symbol," p. 160 (cited from the reprinted edition of this essay found in Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush*).

27. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, p. 97; this quote brought to my attention by Bell, *Ritual*, p. 40.

28. See McKenzie, *King David*, pp. 62, 102, also McKenzie, "Introduction to and Annotations on 1 Samuel," p. 441 (note on 1 Sam 28:2).

29. Steussy, *David*, p. 72.

30. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 96, 103.

31. Note similarly Hertzberg's assessment of David in 1 Sam 27:2–4, "He comes as the head of a powerful, indeed much-feared, band. He is, moreover, a man who is himself related to families living in the hill countries of Caleb and Judah [through the marriages he has made in 1 Sam 25:39–43; see further my discussion below] ... he represents one of the strongest figures in Israel." Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, p. 213.

32. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 106.

33. Saul's son is called Eshbaal in 1 Chr 8:33 and 9:39; elsewhere, he is named Ishboshet. Scholars generally presume that the form Eshbaal, meaning "man of the Lord [i.e., Yahweh]," is original; Ishboshet, "man of shame," was substituted when *ba'al* as an epithet of Yahweh became conflated with the commonly used title of the Canaanite storm god Baal.

34. According to the biblical chronology, David's reign over the southern tribes of Judah lasts seven and a half years while Eshbaal/Ishboshet reigns for only two years in the North. Some scholars presume this latter date must be wrong and that Eshbaal/Ishboshet reigned in the North for the same number of years as did David in the South; others argue that the received tradition is correct and that Eshbaal/Ishboshet reigned for only the last two years of David's reign in the South, following a five year hiatus during which the country sought to reorganize itself after the defeat at the hands of the Philistines described in 1 Samuel 31. Steussy, however, proposes that the narrative sequencing implied by the biblical text is wrong and that David had become king over the southern tribes of Judah several years *before* Saul had died; see her *David*, pp. 76–77. For further discussion, see McCarter, *II Samuel*, pp. 88–89.

35. My analysis here thus agrees with Leonhard Rost's fundamental insights regarding the Samuel narratives and especially the part of Rost's work that isolated an integrated narrative complex called the "History of David's Rise" that runs from 1 Sam 16:14 (or perhaps 1 Sam 16:1) to 2 Sam 5:10. See Rost, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids*.

36. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 106.

37. David's first marriage is to Abigail, the widow of the Calebite Nabal, a name that means "Fool." Nabal, moreover, lives up to his name according to the story of his interactions with David in 1 Sam 25:2–38. He refuses to give provisions to David and his followers when asked, an act of foolishness given that David is in effect running a protection racket according to 1 Sam 25:5–8, claiming that he let no harm come to Nabal's shepherds when they were shearing in the territory where David's band was resident and requesting (essentially demanding) payment in return. David, however, as the mastermind of this protection racket, appears cunning and shrewd. Marrying Abigail is also a shrewd move on David's part, as he becomes heir to Nabal's significant wealth and to Nabal's significant influence within the powerful Calebite

community (see Levenson, "1 Samuel 25"; Levenson and Halpern, "The Political Import of David's Marriages"). As McKenzie writes, "It was a short step from there to the kingship over all Judah" (McKenzie, *King David*, p. 99).

What David does not appear here, though, is liminal, as, again, it is foolishness, not sagacity, that is a characteristic mark of liminality. Similarly, in 1 Sam 21:13–15, although David acts a liminal-like fool, his behaviors are, the text makes clear, a pretense, a clever ruse to protect himself (he feigns madness in order to disguise himself from the Philistines of Gath, who recognize him when he comes into their midst after fleeing from Saul's court and would have him killed as the military champion of their Israelite enemies).

38. It is worth noting, however, that the language of "wandering" (*hithallēk*) is used specifically of David, in 1 Sam 23:13.

39. Goliath, granted, might be thought of as an otherworldly being, given the traditions that exist regarding his substantial height. However, the "six cubits and a span" (that is, nine feet, nine inches) reported in the Masoretic text is probably a secondary reading. The original, as suggested by McCarter, would have been four cubits and a span (that is, six feet, nine inches). As McCarter admits, this still marks Goliath as "a true giant in an age when a man well under six feet might be considered tall." Yet Goliath is not the fantastical giant we sometimes imagine him to be. McCarter, *1 Samuel*, pp. 286, 291. See also, on Goliath's gigantic nature, Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, p. 8 and n. 4 on that page; McKenzie, *King David*, pp. 73–75.

40. Cf., however, Halpern in *David's Secret Demons*, passim, who argues (p. 6) that David, once he becomes king, manifests "an independence of the law [and] a personal lust" that were "born in David's days as an exile in the wilderness." In Halpern's understanding, that is, David, as is typical in a rite of passage, is transformed by his time living as an outlaw and bandit. Atypically for a rite of passage, however, David as Halpern describes him is not particularly transformed for the better.

41. A good summary of the ancient Near Eastern and biblical data can be found in Vancil, "Sheep, Shepherd," pp. 1188a–1190a.

42. See Gen 50:10, Jdt 16:24, Sir 22:12, 2 Esd 5:20. It is important to note, however, that the biblical materials are not unanimous in indicating a seven-day mourning period in Israelite tradition: 2 Sam 3:35 may suggest a mourning period of one day or less, whereas Num 20:29 and Deut 34:8 indicate a thirty-day period of mourning.

43. Ackerman, "Why Is Miriam Also Among the Prophets?" See also Haldar, *The Notion of the Desert*, p. 5; Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif,'" pp. 50, 54; Talmon, "Wilderness," p. 947b; Cohn, *Shape of Sacred Space*, pp. 7–23; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, pp. 35–36. The Haldar, Talmon, and Cohn references were all brought to my attention by Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, p. 35.

44. This contra Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 55, who speaks of the two heroes' "equality" based on the fact that "there is not a trace of the distinction, elsewhere so central, between the active and passive role."

45. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

46. Schroer and Staubli, "Saul, David and Jonathan," pp. 22–36. Gide's play was brought to my attention by Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, pp. 148–149.

47. Above, p. 177.

48. McKenzie, chapter 2 in *King David*, pp. 25–46.

49. McCarter, "The Apology of David."

50. McKenzie, *King David*, p. 32. Halpern is also an enthusiastic follower of McCarter's analysis; see Halpern's *David's Secret Demons*, pp. 75–76.

51. McCarter, "The Apology of David," p 500; see also McKenzie, *King David*, p. 32.

52. The apologetic nature of the Jonathan materials were not really explored by McCarter in his initial presentation, "The Apology of David." They have, however, been commented on by McKenzie; see his *King David*, pp. 84–85.

53. McCarter, *I Samuel*, pp. 16–17; McCarter, "The Apology of David," pp. 492–493; on 1 Sam 20:11–17, cf. my comments above, n. 15.

54. Cf., as noted in chapter 1 (pp. 8–11), David M. Halperin's discussion of sexual and social isomorphism in classical Athens; see Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, p. 30.

55. Stone, *Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, p. 79.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 76; Stone, "Gender and Homosexuality in Judges 19," p. 97.

57. To some extent, my reading here agrees with that proposed by Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, pp. 148–151, and Jobling, *1 Samuel*, pp. 161–165. The authors of both of these works agree that casting Jonathan as wifelike is part of the "proclamation," as Fewell and Gunn describe it (p. 151), of David's ascendancy. However, I find that neither Fewell and Gunn nor Jobling really considers adequately the way in which Jonathan's portrayal as wifelike is integrally tied to the ancient Israelite understanding of gender identity within male-male sexual interactions. Fewell and Gunn, in particular, seem to assume that the paradigms of sexual relations that are a part of our world are virtually identical to those of the ancient Israelites: for example, in discussing the fact that Jonathan, whom they take as David's lover, also fathered children, they speak of the possibility that Jonathan was bisexual, or of the possibility that he, although his primary sexual orientation was homosexual, lived out a heterosexual role for at least some part of his life. To be sure, in making this latter suggestion, Fewell and Gunn argue that such behavior is "common in patriarchal societies," thereby indicating their understanding that patterns of sexual relationships vary across cultures. But they do not seem to realize that so great is the degree of variation that it makes no sense, within ancient Israelite tradition, to speak at all of homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual in the way we think of these terms.

58. McCarter, "The Apology of David," pp. 502–503.

59. Jonathan's son is called Merib-baal in 1 Chr 8:34 and 9:40, but Mephibosheth in 2 Sam 4:4. As in the case of the names used of Saul's son Eshbaal/Ishboshet (above, n. 33), scholars generally presume that the form Merib-baal is original and that the *ba'al* element of this name, which originally referred to Yahweh as "Lord," was changed once it became used primarily as the title with the Canaanite storm god. In this name also the first element *mērīb*, or at some points *mērī*, was changed to *mēpī*, "from the mouth of." Probably this is due to textual confusion, whereby the original name of Jonathan's son and Saul's grandson Merib-baal became conflated with the name of another relative of Saul, Mephiba'al (2 Sam 21:8).

60. Damrosch, *Narrative Covenant*, pp. 204–205.

61. The Song of Songs, anomalous in so many respects when compared to the rest of the biblical literature, is also anomalous regarding the usage of *'ahēb* and *'ahābā*. There it is the young maiden who over and over is said to love the young man (Cant 1:7, 2:5, 3:1, 2, 3, 4, 5:8); also the "maidens" generally are said to love him (Cant 1:3, 4). Only once, though, and obliquely, is the man's love for the maiden described (Cant 2:4), where the maiden claims, "his intention toward me was love [*ahābā*]."

62. Gen 29:30 reports that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, which suggests Jacob was not without affection for the older sister. Yet two verses later, in Gen 29:32, Leah gives voice to the hope that "now" (*'attā*), because she has given birth to Reuben, Jacob will love her, which suggests she has not found herself the object of

Jacob's affection prior to that point.

63. On this virtual "embargo in the narrative in suggesting that David cares for Jonathan," see, in addition to Jobling, *1 Samuel*, p. 163, which is the source of this quote, Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 93; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 53, n. 22; Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, pp. 150–151.

64. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 82; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 23.

65. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, p. 86; see similarly Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 24.

66. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 25; see similarly Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 86–87.

67. See Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 81–85; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 43–46.

68. In 2 Sam 21:8, according to the Masoretic text, Michal does appear again, along with a notice that David has killed the five sons she had borne to Adriel, son of Barzillai, the Meholathite. But several ancient manuscripts read Merab here for Michal, and this obviously accords far better with the tradition of Michal's barrenness recounted in 2 Sam 6:23, as well as with the account of Merab's marriage to Adriel the Meholathite in 1 Sam 18:19. See, with references to further discussion, McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 439; also Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 90–91; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 38.

69. As is most famously indicated by Rachel's plaint to Jacob, "Give me children or I will die," in Gen 30:1.

70. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 34.

71. Reading *klby* with the *Qēṛē'* in 1 Sam 25:3 for the *Kētīb klbw*.

72. Levenson, "1 Samuel 25," pp. 26–27.

73. See also above, n. 37, where, in the context of considering to what degree the David story actually conforms to van Gennep's rite-of-passage paradigm, I discuss David's cleverness as the mastermind of this racket, as opposed to the foolishness we might have expected according to Victor Turner's paradigm of liminality.

74. Berlin, "Abigail 1," p. 43.

75. Levenson, "1 Samuel 25," p. 19; also Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, p. 31; McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 401.

76. Berlin, "Abigail 1," p. 43.

77. McCarter, *I Samuel*, pp. 401–402; see also, regarding McCarter's redactional understanding of 1 Sam 20:14–16, n. 15 above.

78. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, p. 31.

Epilogue

1. See chapter 5.

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